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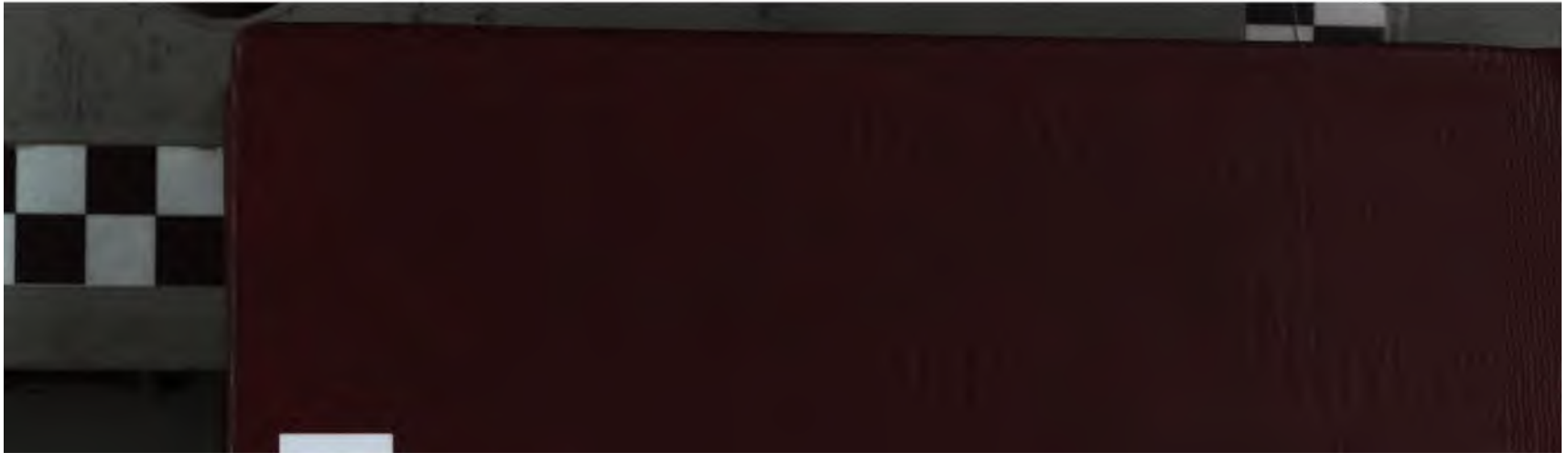

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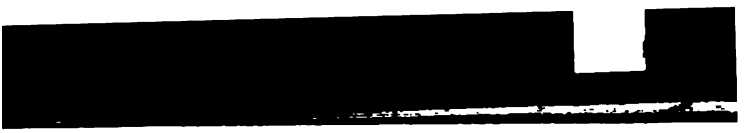

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PROLOGUE

THE MOMENT OF TRIUMPH

HIGH above the night-shrouded street, whose silence was only broken by the occasional tramp of the military patrol or the gruff challenges of the sentries on the fortifications, a man was walking, with jerky, uneven strides, up and down a vast attic in an ancient house overlooking the old Fisher's Gate, close by where the River Ill leaves the famous city of Strassburg.

The room, practically destitute of ordinary furniture, was fitted up as a chemical and physical laboratory, and the man was Doctor Emil Fargeau, the most distinguished scientific investigator that the lost province of Alsace had produced—a tall, spare man of about sixty, with sloping, stooping shoulders and forward-thrown head, thinly covered with straggling iron-grey hair. It was plain that he was in the habit of shaving clean, but just now there was a short white stubble both on his upper lip and on the lean wrinkled cheeks which showed the nervous workings of the muscles so plainly. In fact, his whole appearance was that of a man too completely absorbed by an overmastering idea to pay any attention to the small details of life.

And such was the exact truth—for these few midnight minutes which were being ticked off by an ancient wooden clock in the corner were the most anxious of his life. In fact, a few more of them would decide whether the Great Experiment, for which he had sacrificed everything, even to his home and his great professional position, was to be a success or a failure.

On the long, bare, pine table, beside which he was pacing up and down, stood a strange fabric about three feet high. It was round, and about the size of a four-gallon ale jar. It was covered completely by a closed glass cylinder, and rested on four strong glass supports. From the floor on either side of the table a number of twisted, silk-covered wires rose from two sets of storage batteries. Within the four supports was a wooden dish, and on this lay a piece of bright steel some four inches square and about an inch thick, just under a circle of needles which hung down in a circle from the bottom of the machine.

A very faint humming sound filled the room, and made a somewhat uncanny accompaniment to the leisurely tick of the clock and the irregular shuffling of the doctor's slippered feet.

Every now and then he stopped, and put his ear near to the machine, and then looked at the piece of steel with a gleam of longing anticipation in his keen, deep-set, grey eyes. Then he began his walk again, and his lips went on working, as though he were holding an inaudible conversation with himself. At last there came a faint whirr from the clock, a little window opened, and a wooden bird bobbed out

and said "Cuckoo" once. The doctor stopped instantly, took out his watch and compared it with the clock.

"Now, let us see!" he said, quietly, in his somewhat guttural Alsatian French, for in this supreme moment of his life he had gone back to the patois of his boyhood, which he had spoken in the days before the Teuton's iron hand had snatched his well-loved native land from France and begun to rule it according to the pitiless doctrine of Blood and Iron.

He pulled the platter out from under the machine, picked up a little wooden mallet from the table, and, with a trembling hand, struck the steel plate in the centre. It splintered instantly to fragments, as though it had only been a thin sheet of glass. The doctor dropped the mallet, lifted his hand to the window that looked out over the river towards the citadel, and said:

"It is done! And so, Germany, stealer of our land and oppressor of my people, will I break the great fabric of your power with one touch of this weak old hand of mine!"

Then he threw open one of the old-fashioned dormer windows that looked out over the northern part of the city towards France, and began to speak again in a low, intense tone which rose and fell slightly as his deep breaths came and went.

"But France, my beautiful mother France, thou shalt know soon that I have done more than given thee the power to turn on thy conqueror and crush him. I can make thee queen and mistress of the world, and I will do it. The other nations shall live and prosper only at thy bidding, and they shall pay

thee tribute for the privilege of being something more than the savages from which they came.

"Those who will not pay thee tribute shall go back to the Stone Age, for I will show thee how to make their metals useless. Only with thy permission shall their steam-engines work for them, or their telegraphs record their words; for I have found the Soul of the World, the Living Principle of Material Things, and I will draw it out of the fabric of Nature as I have done out of that block of steel. And I will give it into thy hands, and the nations shall live or die according to thy pleasure.

"And you, Adelaide, daughter of our ancient line of kings, descendant of the Grand Monarch, you shall join hands with my Victor after he has flung off the livery of his servitude, and together you shall raise up the throne of Saint Louis in the place where these usurpers and Republican canaille have reigned over ruined France. The Prince of Condé shall sit in the seat of his ancestors, and after him Adelaide de Montpensier—and Victor, my son, shall stand beside her, ruler of the world!

"A miracle, and yet 'tis true! Possible, for I have made it possible. It is only for France to believe me and spend her millions—millions that will buy her the Empire of the Earth, and it is done—done as easily as I worked that seeming miracle just now. I have risked much—all—for I have hazarded even honour itself; but my faith is justified, and I have won—and now, let me see how I stand before the world for the present."

He went and sat down before the only piece of ordinary furniture that the laboratory contained, an

old oak bureau, on which stood a little shaded reading-lamp. He unlocked a drawer, and took out a little wash-leather bag. He undid it and emptied it into his hand. There were ten twenty-mark pieces —just ten pounds and a few pence in English money. In his pocket he had perhaps twenty-five marks more.

"It is not much," he whispered, as he looked at the gold in his hand; "not much at the end of a life's work, as the world would call it. But the world knows nothing of that!" he went on, half-turning his head towards the machine on the table. "As the world takes wealth, this is all that is left of fortune, lands, and savings. Everything is gone but this, and that—ay, and more also. Yes, it was a hard fate that forced me to do that. Still, science showed me how to alter the figures so that not even the filthy Jew Weinthal himself could tell if he had the draft in his hand. That he will never have; for it has a month to run, and before that France will have made me rich. It was not right, but the scoundrel only gave me half what the last farm was worth, and I had to have more to finish my work. Yet, is it not honourable even to sin in such a cause! Well, well, it is over now. I have triumphed, and that atones for all; and so to bed and good dreams, and to-morrow to Paris!"

CHAPTER I

IT was the 27th of January, the Kaiser's birthday, and the reception-rooms of the German Embassy, on the Nevski Prospekt, overlooking the snow-covered quays and ice-bound waters of the Neva, were filled with as brilliant a throng as could have been found between the Ourals and the English Channel.

It has been said that Petersburg in the winter season contains more beautiful women than any other capital in Europe; and certainly the fair guests of His Excellency the German Ambassador to the Court of the White Czar went far towards proving the truth of the saying. The dresses were as ideal as they were indescribable, and the jewels which blazed round the softly moulded throats and on the fair white breasts, and gleamed on dainty coiffures of every hue, from ebony black to the purest flaxen, would have been bad to match even among the treasures of Oriental princes.

The men, too, were splendid in every variety of uniform, from the gold-laced broadcloth of Diplomacy to the white and gold of the Imperial Guard. Not a man was present whose left breast was not glittering with stars and medals, and, in most cases, crossed with the ribbon of some distinguished Order.

The windless, frosty air outside was still vocal with the jingling of the sleigh-bells as the vehicles sped swiftly and noiselessly up to the open doors,

for it was only a little after ten, and all the guests had not yet arrived. Precisely at half-past a sleigh drawn by three perfectly black Orloff horses swept into the courtyard, and a few minutes later the major-domo passed through the open folding-doors and said, in loud but well-trained tones:

"His Highness the Prince de Condé, Duc de Montpensier! Mademoiselle la Marquise de Montpensier!"

At the same moment two lacqueys held aside the heavy curtains which hung on the inside of the doorway, and the latest arrivals entered.

The announcement of the once most noble names in Europe instantly hushed the hum of conversation, and all eyes were turned towards the doorway.

They saw a tall, straight, well-set-up man of about fifty, with dark moustache and imperial, and iron-grey hair still thick and strong. A single glance at his features showed that they bore the indelible stamp of the old Bourbon race. The high, somewhat narrow, forehead was continued in a straight line to the end of the long thin nose. The somewhat high cheek-bones, the delicate ears, the thin, sensitive nostrils, and the strong, slightly protruding chin, might have belonged to the Grande Monarque himself.

He was in ordinary court dress, the broad red ribbon of the Order of St Vladimir crossed his breast, the collar and jewel of the Golden Fleece hung from his neck, and the stars of half-a-dozen other Orders glittered on the left breast of his coat; but, though he bore the greatest name in France, there was not a French order among them,

for Louis Xavier de Condé was a voluntary exile from the land over which his ancestors had once ruled so splendidly and so ruinously.

For three generations his branch of the great family had refused to recognise any ruler in France, from the First Consul to the President of the Third Republic. In his eyes they were one and all usurpers and plebeian upstarts, who ruled only by the suffrages of an ignorant and deluded mob. In short, his creed and the rule of his daily life were hatred and contempt of the French democracy. On this subject he was almost a fanatic, and in days soon to come this fanaticism of his was destined to influence events, of which only three people in all that crowded assembly were even dreaming.

The girl at his side—for she was not yet twenty-one—might well have been taken for a twentieth-century replica of Marie Antoinette, and to say that, is to say that among all the beautiful and stately women in that brilliant concourse, none were quite so beautiful and stately as Adelaide de Condé, Marquise de Montpensier.

Of all the hundred eyes which were turned upon this peerless daughter of the line of St Louis, the most eager were those of a splendidly-built young fellow of about twenty-eight, dressed in the blue and white uniform of the Uhlan regiment of the German army. Captain Victor Fargeau, military attaché to the German Embassy in Petersburg, was perhaps the handsomest, and, at the same time, manliest-looking man in all that company of soldiers and diplomats. At least, so certainly thought Adelaide de Condé, as she saw his dark blue eyes light up

with a swift gleam of admiration, and the bronze on his cheeks grow deeper as the quick blood flushed beneath it.

It was a strange bond that united the daughter of the Bourbons with the soldier and subject of the German Kaiser, and yet it must have been a close one. For, after the first formal presentations were over, her eyes sent a quick signal to his, which brought him instantly to her side, and when their hands met the clasp was closer, and lasted just a moment longer than mere acquaintance or even friendship would have warranted.

"Can you tell me, Captain, whether the gentleman who calls himself the French Ambassador has honoured us with his presence to-night?" said the Prince, as he shook hands with the young soldier.

"No, Prince, he has not," he replied. "I hear that, almost at the last moment, he sent an attaché with his regrets and excuses. Of course, as you know, there is a little friction between the Governments just now, and naturally, too, he would know that Your Highness and Mam'selle la Marquise would honour us with your presence—so, on the whole, I suppose he thought it more convenient to discover some important diplomatic matter which would deprive him of the pleasure of joining us."

"Ah," said the Marquise, looking up at him with a a glance and a smile that set his pulses jumping, "then perhaps Sophie Valdemar was right when she told me this afternoon that His Excellency had really a good excuse for not coming—an interview with Count Lansdorf, and afterwards with no less

a personage than the Little Father himself! And, you know, Sophie knows everything."

"Ah yes," said the Prince; "I had forgotten that. You told me of it. I should not wonder if the subject of their conversation were not unconnected with an increase of the French fleet in Chinese waters. And then Morocco is——"

"Chut, papa!" said the Marquise, in a low tone, "we must not talk politics here. In Petersburg ceilings have eyes and walls have ears."

"That is true," laughed Victor; "not even Embassies here are neutral ground."

At this moment a lacquey approached and bowed to Captain Fargeau.

"Pardon me a moment," he said to his companions; "I am wanted for something, and I can see a good many envious eyes looking this way. Ah, there goes the music! They will be dancing presently, and there will be many candidates for Mam'selle's hand. But you will keep me a waltz or two, won't you? and may I hope also for supper?"

"My dear Victor," she replied, with a bewildering smile, "have I not already told you that you may hope for everything? Meanwhile, *au revoir!* When you have done your business you will find us in the salon."

As he moved away, the curtains were again drawn aside, and the major-domo announced:

"His Excellency Count Valdemar! The Countess Sophie Valdemar!"

The Count was a big, strongly-built man in diplomatic uniform. His face was of the higher Russian type, and heavily bearded. His daughter, the Coun-

tess Sophie, was a strange contrast to him, slight and fair, with perfectly cut features, almost Grecian in their regularity, golden-bronze hair, dark, straight eyebrows, and big, wide-set, pansy-blue eyes. The only Russian trait that she possessed was her mouth —full-lipped and sensuous, almost sensular, in fact; and yet it was small enough, and the lips were so daintily shaped that it added to, rather than detracted from her beauty.

They were lips whose kisses had lured more than one bearer of a well-known name to destruction. Some they had sent to the scaffold, and others were still dreaming of their fatal sweetness in prison or in hopeless exile; for Sophie Valdemar, daughter of Count Leo Valdemar, Chief of the Third Section of the Ministry of the Interior, had been trained up from girlhood by her father in every art of intrigue, until even he was fully justified in calling her the most skilful diplomatic detective in Europe.

To her friends and acquaintances she was just a charming and brilliantly-accomplished girl of nineteen, who had reigned as undisputed Queen of Beauty in Moscow and Petersburg until Adelaide de Condé had come from Vienna with her father, and, by some mysterious means, unknown even to her, had been received into instant favour at Court, and in the most exclusive circles in the most exclusive city in the world. In fact, the enigma which it was the present object of her life to solve was how this could be possible—granted the tacit alliance between the Russian Empire and the French Republic, and the Prince's openly expressed contempt for all modern things French and Republican. There were,

indeed, only three people in Europe who could have solved that riddle, and she was not one of them.

As she entered she saw Victor coming towards her. Instantly her eyes brightened, and the faintest of flushes showed through the pallor of her silken skin. He stopped for a moment to greet them, but his clasp on her hand was nothing more than the formal pressure which friendship expects, and she looked in vain for any gleam in his eyes answering that in her own.

When he had passed in towards the door she flung a swift glance round the room, and as the soft pansy eyes rested on the exquisite shape and lovely face of Adelaide de Condé they seemed to harden and blacken for just the fraction of a second. The next moment she and her father were greeting the Prince and the Marquise with a cordiality that was only tempered by the almost indefinable reserve which the place and the situation made indispensable.

"My dear Marquise," she said, in that soft, pure French which, outside France, is only heard in Russia, "if possible, you have excelled yourself to-night; you are a perfect vision——"

"My dear Sophie," laughed the Marquise, "what is the matter? You seem as formal as you wish to be flattering; but really, if it is a matter of compliments, it is not you, but I who should be paying them."

"Quite a waste of time, my dear children," laughed the Count, gruffly. "Imagine you two paying each other compliments when there are a couple of hundred men here with thousands of them crowding up to their lips. Still, Prince," he went on, "it is better so than

rivalry, for rival beauty has always worked more harm in the world than rival ambitions."

"There can be no question of rivalry, my dear Count," replied the Prince. "Why should the Evening envy the Morning, or the Lily be jealous of the Rose?"

"Put like a Frenchman and a statesman, Prince: that was said as only one of the old regime could say it," said Sophie, with a little backward movement of her head. "How is it that the men of this generation never say things like that—or, if they try to, bungle over it."

"Perhaps they are too busy to revive the lost art of politeness," laughed Adelaide. "But come, papa; they are playing a lovely waltz, and I am dying for a dance, and so is Sophie, I daresay."

"And, by their looks, many of these young men are dying of the same complaint; so suppose we go into the salon," said the Prince, offering his arm to Sophie.

It was nearly half-an-hour before Victor found Adelaide disengaged in the ball-room. The first waltz that she had saved for him was just beginning, and, as he slipped his arm round her waist, he whispered under cover of the music:

"If you please, we will just take a couple of turns, and then you will give me a few precious minutes of your company in the winter garden."

She glanced up swiftly at him with a look of keen inquiry, and whispered in reply:

"Of course, my Victor, if you wish it; especially as it is getting a little warm here—and no doubt you have something more interesting for me than dancing."

"I think you will find it so," he said, as they glided away into the shining, smoothly-swirling throng which filled the great salon.

After two or three turns they stopped at the curtained entrance of the vast conservatory, whose tropical trees and flowers and warm scented air formed a delicious contrast to the cold, black, Russian winter's night. Almost at the same moment Sophie Valdemar said to her partner, a smart young officer of the Imperial Guard:

"I think that will do for the present, if you don't mind; I don't feel very vigorous to-night, somehow: suppose you find me a seat in the garden, and then go and tell one of the men to bring me an ice."

They stopped just as Victor and Adelaide passed through the curtains. They followed a couple of yards behind them, and Sophie quickened her step a little, her teeth came together with a little snap, and her eyes darkened again as she saw Adelaide look up at her companion and heard her say softly:

"Well, what is your news—for I am sure you have some?"

"Yes, I have," he replied; "and the greatest of good news; you know from whom?"

"Ah," said Adelaide, with a little catch in her voice, "from him; and has he——"

"Succeeded? Yes; and to the fullest of his expectations. He goes to Paris to-morrow, and then——"

The rest of the sentence was lost to Sophie as they turned away into the garden.

Her companion found her a seat under a tree-fern, and left her leaning back in her long-cushioned chair of Russian wicker, looking across the winter garden,

through the palms and ferns, at Victor and Adelaide, as they moved along, obviously looking for a secluded corner. During those few moments her whole nature had, for the time being, completely changed. The jealous, passionate woman had vanished, and in her place remained the cold, clear-headed, highly-trained intriguer, with incarnate and unemotional intellect, thinking swiftly and logically, trying to find some meaning in the words that she had just heard, words which, if she had only known their import, she would have found pregnant with the fate of Europe.

"I wonder who has succeeded beyond his best expectations? Someone closely connected with both of them, of course! And Paris — why should his success take him to Paris? Victor Fargeau, Alsatian though he is, is one of the most brilliant of the younger generation of German officers, a favourite of the Emperor, a member of the Staff, and attaché here in Petersburg. And she, my dear friend and enemy, is a Bourbon, an aristocrat of the first water, the daughter of an open enemy of our very good and convenient ally the French Republic. Paris— he who has succeeded is going to Paris. Well, I would give a good deal to know who he is and why he is going to Paris."

CHAPTER II

"AND so, Monsieur le Ministre, I am to take that as your final word? I have given you every proof that I can—saving the impossible—the bringing of my apparatus from Strassburg to Paris, which, of course, you know is an impossibility, since it would have to cross the frontier, which was once a French high road. I have shown you the facts, the figures, the drawings—everything. Can you not see that I am honest, that I love my country, from which I have been torn away—I who come from a family that has lived in Alsace since it was first French territory — I who am a Frenchman through five generations -- I who have sold my son to the Prussians—I who have masqueraded for years in the Prussian University of Strassburg, once the Queen of the Rhine Province — I who have discovered a secret which has lain buried since the days of the great Faraday—I who have discovered, or I should say re-discovered, after him the true theory, and, what is more, the actual working of the magnetic tides which flow north and south through the two hemispheres to the pole—I who can give you, Monsieur le Ministre, and through you France, the control of those tides, so that you may make them ebb and flow as the tides of the sea do—prosperity with the flow, adversity with the ebb, that is what it comes to—ah, it is incredible!

"Once more, not as a scientist, not as an inventor, but only as a loyal son of France, let me implore you, Monsieur le Ministre, not to regard what I have told you as the dream of an enthusiast who has only dreamt and not done."

"If you have done as much as you say, Monsieur," replied the French Minister of War, leaning back in his chair and twisting up the left point of his moustache as he looked coldly and incredulously across his desk at Doctor Emil Fargeau, late Professor of Physical Science at the University of Strassburg, "how comes it that you have not been able to bring actual, tangible proofs to me here in Paris? Why, for instance, could you not have performed the miracle that you have just been telling me about in one of our laboratories in Paris? If you had done that—well, we might have investigated the miracle, and, after investigation, might have some conviction—a conviction, if you will pardon me saying so, which might have enabled us to overcome the very natural prejudice that the Government of the Republic may be expected to have against a man of ancient family, whose ancestors had been French subjects for, as you say, five generations, but who has become himself a German subject, and has permitted his son, his only son, to enter the Prussian service, and has endured the shame of seeing him rise year after year, rank upon rank, in the favour of the man who is destined to be to Germany what the Great Napoleon was to France.

"No, sir, I cannot believe you; I can understand what you have told me about what you call your invention, but understanding without conviction is

like hunger without a good dinner. I am not satisfied. Bring your apparatus here; let me see it work. Convince me that you can do what you say, and all that you ask for is yours; but without conviction I can guarantee you nothing.

"With every consideration that is due to the position that you have occupied in what may be called the enemy's country, the stolen provinces, I must take leave to say that very few days pass without an interview of this kind. I assure you, my dear sir, that saviours of our country and regainers of the Lost Provinces are to be counted by hundreds, but we have not yet found one whose scheme is capable of sustaining a practical test."

"But, Monsieur le Ministre, I can assure you with equal faith that this is not a scheme, a theory, a something in the air. On the contrary, it is a theory reduced to fact—solid fact; what I have said to you I can do before you. I can convince you——"

"Exactly, my dear sir, exactly," said the Minister; "you will not think me discourteous if I say that within the last six months I have had visits from inventors of air-ships who could create aerial navies which would assume the dominion of the air, annihilate armies and fleets, and make fortifications useless because impotent. Others have come to me with plans which, if the theory could only have been translated into practice, would have given us a submarine navy which in six months would have sunk every cruiser and battleship on the ocean. In fact, in one of the drawers of this very bureau I have a most exactly detailed scheme for diverting the Gulf Stream through the much-lamented Panama

Canal into the Pacific, and so reducing the British Islands, the home of our ancient enemies, to the conditions—I mean, of course, the climatic conditions, of Labrador. That is to say, that nine months in the year London, Southampton, Plymouth, Liverpool, Glasgow, to say nothing of the ports on the east and the south, would be frozen up. The British Navy—that curse of the world—could not operate; Britain's shipping trade would be paralysed, and after that her industries. They are free-traders, and so they don't believe it; but it would be if it could be done. But it could not be done, Monsieur; and that is the objection which I have to this most splendidly promising scheme of yours."

"But, Monsieur le Ministre, I assure that it is only a question of—well, I will say a few thousand francs to convince you that I am not one of those scientific adventurers who have perhaps imposed on the credulity of the Government before. What I have described to you is the truth—the truth as I have wrought it by my own labour, as I have seen it with my own eyes, as I have finished it with my own hand."

"Tres bien, Monsieur! Then all you have to do is, as I said before, to bring your apparatus here, perform the same experiment before a committee of experts, and if you break the piece of steel as you would a piece of glass—voila, c'est fini! We are convinced, and what you ask for will be granted."

"But, Monsieur le Ministre, nothing could be fairer than that; only you have not remembered what I told you during our last interview. I have

spent hundreds of thousands of francs to bring this idea of mine to perfection. I have spent every centime——"

"Pfennige I think you should call them, Professor," interrupted the Minister, with a perceptible sneer. "I am afraid you are forgetting your new nationality; and, since you are a German subject, living in German territory, as it now is, it is permissible for me to ask why this wonderful invention of yours was not offered first to Germany—that is to say, if it has not already been offered and refused."

As the Minister of War spoke these few momentous words, accentuating them with his pen on the blotting-pad in front of him, Doctor Fargeau arose from his seat on the other side of the desk, and said, in a voice which would have been stronger had it not been broken by an uncontrollable emotion:

"Monsieur le Ministre, you have spoken, and, officially, the matter is finished. Through you I have offered France the Empire of the World. Through you France has refused it. You ask me to bring my apparatus here to Paris, to prove that it is a question of practice, not of theory. I cannot do it, and why?—because, as I told you, I have spent every centime, or pfennige, if you like, in making this thing possible.

"Everything is gone: the farms and vineyards that have been ours since the days of St Louis are mortgaged. We are homeless. I have no home to go back to. I have borrowed more than I can pay; I trusted everything to you, to the intelligence and patriotism of France. I have not even enough money to take me back to the home that I have

ruined for the sake of France and her lost provinces. It was impossible to think that you would disbelieve me. A thousand francs, Monsieur le Ministre, would be enough—enough to save me from ruin, and to make France the mistress of the world. Even out of your own pocket, it would not be very much. Think, I implore you, of all that I have suffered and sacrificed; of all the hours that I have spent in making this great ideal a reality——"

"And which, if you will excuse me saying so, monsieur," replied the Minister, rising rather sharply from his seat, "has yet to be proved to our satisfaction, to be a concrete reality instead of a dream—the dream of an enthusiast who does not even possess the credit of having remained a Frenchman. If, indeed, your personal necessities are so pressing, and a fifty-franc note would be of any use to you—well, seeing that you were once a Frenchman——"

As he said this the Minister took his pocket-book out, and, as he did so, Doctor Fargeau sprang from his seat, and said, in quick, husky tones:

"Mais, non, Monsieur le Ministre! I came here not to ask for charity, but to give France the dominion of the world. Those whom she has chosen as her advisers have treated me either as a lunatic or a quack. Very well, let it be so. Through you I have offered to France a priceless gift; you have refused it for the sake of a paltry thousand francs or so. Very well, you will see the end of this, though I shall not. I have devoted my life to this ideal. I have dreamt the dream of France the Mistress of the World, as she was in the days of la Grande Monarque. I have found the means of realising the ideal. You

and those who with you rule the destinies of France have refused to accept my statements as true. On your heads be it, as the Moslems say. I have done. If this dream of mine should ever be heard of again, if it should ever be realised, France may some day learn how much she has lost through her official incredulity."

Emil Fargeau left the Minister of War a broken man—broken in mind and heart as well as in means. In youth it is easy, in early manhood it is possible, to survive the sudden destruction of a life's ideal; but when the threescore years have been counted, and the dream and the labours of half a lifetime are suddenly brought to nought, it is another matter. It is ruin—utter and hopeless; and so it was with Emil Fargeau.

He had risked everything on what he had honestly believed to be the certainty of his marvellous discovery being taken up and developed by the French Government. In fact, he was so certain of it, that, before leaving his laboratory at Strassburg, he had taken the precaution to destroy the essential parts of his accumulator, lest, during his absence, his sanctum might be invaded and some one stumble by accident on his discovery. In a word, he had staked everything and lost everything. To go back was impossible. Everything he had was sold or mortgaged. He had been kept by official delays more than a fortnight in Paris, and he had barely a hundred francs left, and even of this more than half would be necessary to pay his modest hotel bill for the week.

And then, worse than all, there was that fatal

indiscretion into which he had permitted his enthusiasm to betray him — an indiscretion which placed him absolutely at the mercy of a German Jew money-lender, who, under the rigid laws of Germany, could send him to penal servitude for the rest of his life.

No, there was no help for it; there was only one way out of the terrible impasse into which his enthusiasm, and that moral weakness which is so often associated with great intellectual power, had led him, and that way he took.

He went back to his hotel, and spent about an hour in writing letters. One of these was directed to Captain Victor Fargeau, German Embassy, Petersburg. Another was directed to Reuss Weinthal, Judenstrasse, Strassburg. The third, without date or signature, he placed in a little air-tight tin case, with the complete specifications of his discovery.

He took off his coat and waistcoat, and fastened this to his body so that it just came in the small of his back. Then, when he had dressed himself and put on a light overcoat, he took a small handbag, for appearance's sake, walked to the Nord Station, and took a second-class ticket to Southampton, *via* le Havre.

At midnight the steamer was in mid-channel, and Emil Fargeau was taking his last look on sea and sky from the fore-deck. For a moment he looked back eastward over the dark waters towards the land of his ruined hopes, and murmured brokenly:

"My beautiful France, I have offered you the Empire of the World, but the dolts and idiots you

have chosen to govern you have refused it. 'Tant pis pour toi'! Now I will give the secret to the Fates—to reveal it or to keep it hidden for ever, as they please. For me it is the end!"

As the last words left his lips he took a rapid glance round the deserted deck, and slipped over the rail into the creaming water that was swirling past the vessel's side. In another moment one of the whirling screws had caught him and smashed him out of human shape, and what was left of him, with the little tin box containing the secrets of a world-empire lashed to it, went floating away in the broad wake that the steamer left behind it.

CHAPTER III

IT was a lovely May morning on the English Channel, and the steam yacht *Nadine* was travelling under easy steam at about eight knots an hour midway between Guernsey and Southampton. Her owner, Ernest Shafto Hardress, Viscount Branston, eldest son of the Earl of Orrel, was taking his early coffee on the bridge with his college chum and guest, Frank Lamson, M.A. of Cambridge, and Doctor of Science of London, the youngest man save one who had won the gold medal in the examination for that distinguished degree. In fact, he was only thirty-two, and the medal had already been in his possession nearly a year.

The morning was so exquisitely mild, that sea and sky looked rather as though they were in the Mediterranean instead of the Channel. They were sitting in their pyjamas, with their bare feet in grass slippers.

"Well, I suppose it's time to go below and shave and dress; Miss Chrysie and Lady Olive will be up soon, and we'll have to make ourselves presentable," said Lamson, getting out of his deck-chair and throwing the end of his cigarette overboard. "Hello, what's that? Here, Hardress, get up! There's a body there in the water, horribly mangled."

"What!" exclaimed Hardress, springing from his seat and going to the end of the bridge where

Lamson was standing. "So it is! Poor chap, what can have made such a mess of him as that?"

"Fallen overboard from a steamer, I should say, and got mopped by the screw," said Lamson, in his cold, bloodless voice. "It's a way screws have, you know, especially twin screws."

"That's just like you, Lamson," said Hardress; "you talk about the poor chap just as if he was an empty barrel. Still, he's been a man once, and it's only fair that he should have Christian burial, anyhow."

As he said this he caught the handle of the engine telegraph and pulled it over. "Stop." The yacht slowed down immediately, and he went on:

"Lamson, you might go and send the stewardess to tell the ladies not to get up for half-an-hour or so. This isn't exactly the sort of job a woman wants to see. Mr Jackson, will you kindly lower away the quarter-boat?"

The young Viscount was right—for the object that was hauled in from the sea could hardly even be called a human corpse, so frightfully was it mangled out of all mortal shape. When it was brought on board, a careful search was made through the tattered remnants of clothing that were still attached to it for some marks of identification; but nothing was found. A couple of pockets, one in the waistcoat and one in the trousers which were left intact, contained nothing. There was no mark on what was left of the linen. The upper half of the head was gone, and so there was no use in photographing the remains. In short, the ghastly spectacle was the only revelation of a secret of the sea which might never be further revealed.

"I'm afraid it's no good," said Lamson; "there's nothing that anybody could recognise the poor chap by. In fact, it looks to me like a case of deliberate suicide by someone who didn't want to be identified. He's evidently fallen overboard from a steamer, and people don't do that by accident with empty pockets. For instance, that inside coat pocket was made to button, and would probably have had a pocket-book and tickets in it. From what's left of them I should say the clothes were French, and, judging by the locality, I should say he might have been a French passenger from le Havre—perhaps to Southampton on one of the South-Western boats. Hello, what's this? Perhaps this is a clue to the mystery."

As he spoke he put his hand on the back of the body, where the sodden clothes outlined an oblong shape, a few moments after it had been turned over.

"It feels like a box, or something of that sort. At any rate, we'd better see what it is," he went on, taking a sheath-knife from one of the sailors and ripping the cloth open. "Tied to the body. By Jove! Why, this is mystery on mystery! Nothing in his pockets, no mark on his linen or clothes, and this thing tied to his body! Well, I suppose we may as well see what there is in it; and as you're the owner of the yacht and Deputy-Lieutenant of your county, I suppose I'd better hand it over to you."

As he said this he cut the cords and handed the tin box to Viscount Branston, who said as he took it:

"Of course, we shall have to open it, and we'll do it together after breakfast. Now, Mr Jackson, oblige

me by having the body sewn up in a bit of canvas. I don't want the ladies to see it in that horrible state. And you may as well put on full speed; we don't want it on board any longer than we can help. Now, Lamson, come along and dress."

When they came out of their state-rooms they found the ladies already on deck, taking an ante-prandial stroll arm-in-arm. Lady Olive was a tall, perfectly-proportioned young woman of about twenty-five, not exactly pretty, but with a dark, strong, aristocratic face, which showed breeding in every line, and which was lighted up and relieved most pleasantly by a pair of soft, and yet brilliant, Irish eyes. When her features were in repose, some people would have called her handsome; when she smiled, others would have called her, not pretty, but charming—and they would have been about right.

Her companion, Miss Chrysie Vandel, daughter of Clifford K. Vandel, President of the American Electrical Storage Trust of Buffalo, N.Y., was an absolute contrast to her. She was about an inch shorter, exquisitely fair, and yet possessed of a pair of deep blue eyes, which in some lights looked almost black. Her brows were several shades darker than her hair, which was golden in the sun and brown in the shade. She was not what a connoisseur would call beautiful, for her features were just a trifle irregular, and her mouth was just ever so little too large. Still, taken as a whole, her face had that distracting and indescribable piquancy which seems to be the peculiar property of the well-bred American girl at her best.

Both were dressed in grey serge, short-skirted yachting suits, and each had a white duck yachting cap pinned to her hair.

"Well, Shafto," said Lady Olive, as the two men took their caps off, "and what is all this mystery about? Chrysie and I have been speculating all sorts of things."

"Why, yes, Lord Branston," chimed in Miss Chrysie. "I got out of my bath and fixed myself double quick, half expecting to come on deck and find ourselves held up by a French torpedo-boat, after all that talk we heard in Jersey about the trouble between you and France and Russia over China."

"I am happy to say it is not quite so serious as that, Miss Vandel," said Hardress, "and I hope we shall be able to get you safe to Southampton before the war starts. The fact is, about an hour ago, while Lamson and I were having our coffee on the bridge, he saw—well, the body of a man, terribly mangled, floating in the water. So we stopped to pick it up. It was frightfully mutilated, and, of course, it was nothing for eyes like yours to look upon, so we've had it sewn up in canvas, and we're taking it to Southampton to give it a decent burial."

"Now, I call that real good of you, Viscount. I guess you British have finer feelings in that way than we have. I don't believe Poppa would have stopped his yacht if he'd struck a whole burying lot afloat."

"Well," laughed Hardress; "that is what a busy man like your father might be expected to do. In

fact, I suppose most Englishmen would have done so; but, as it happens, in this case virtue was rewarded—for we have discovered what may be a mystery."

"A mystery! Oh, do say, Viscount. That's just too lovely for words—a yacht, dead body at sea, and a mystery——"

"Yes," said Lamson; "and in a tin box, attached firmly by cords to corpse aforesaid."

"Don't, Mr Lamson; please don't," interrupted Lady Olive, somewhat severely. Then she went on, with a little shiver, "I hope, Shafto, you will get us to Southampton as quickly as you can. I don't want to be shipmates any longer than I can help with—with—ah—remains. It isn't lucky at sea, you know."

"My dear Olive," replied her brother, "about the first thing I thought of was that very idea; that is why we are now steaming full speed—twenty knots instead of eight—so that you and Miss Vandel may be relieved of this disquieting presence on board as soon as possible. And now, by way of passing the inconvenient hours that our new passenger will be with us, suppose we go to breakfast."

"A nice appetising sort of remark that, I must say, Viscount," said Miss Chrysie; "still I suppose we may as well go. This morning air at sea does make living people feel alive; I guess that's why I'm so hungry."

"And after breakfast, Shafto," said Lady Olive, "I presume that you will tell us all about the mystery of the tin box."

"My dear Olive," replied her brother, "it may be

anything or nothing; and, as Lamson found it and gave it to me, instead of having it buried with the unknown deceased, I've agreed with him that we shall go through the contents, whatever they are, together; and, of course, if there's anything really interesting in them, then we shall tell you all about it."

"Now, that's real kind," said Miss Chrysie. "I guess if we don't have quite an interesting conversation over lunch it'll be the fault of our new passenger."

"My dear Chrysie," said Lady Olive, frigidly, "how can you! Really, you remind me rather strongly of what Kipling says about the Americans."

"And what might that be, Lady Olive?" she replied, looking up, with the flicker of a smile round her lips, and the twinkle of a challenge in her eyes.

"I don't think I remember the exact words just now, but I've got the 'Seven Seas' downstairs," replied Lady Olive; "but I think it's something about the cynic devil in his blood that bids him mock his hurrying soul."

"Thanks!" replied Miss Chrysie, with a toss of her shapely head, and an unmistakable sniff; "I think I've read that poem, too. Isn't there a verse in it that runs something this way?—

> "'Inopportune, shrill-accented,
> The acrid Asiatic mirth
> That leaves him careless 'mid his dead,
> The scandal of the elder earth.'"

She repeated the lines with such an exquisite exaggeration of the "shrill accent" that the two

men burst out laughing, and Lady Olive first flushed up to her brows, and then also broke into a saving fit of laughter.

"That's a distinct score for Miss Vandel, Olive," said Hardress. "If you knew the whole poem a bit better, I don't think you'd have made that last remark of yours. But, of course, Miss Vandel will be generous and allow you to take the only way there is out of the difficulty—the way to breakfast."

"Why, certainly," said Miss Chrysie, who was trying hard not to laugh at her little triumph. "Kipling's good, but breakfast's better, in an air like this."

And so, as she would have put it, they "let it go at that," and went down into the saloon to breakfast.

CHAPTER IV

DURING breakfast it had been agreed that Lamson, as the discoverer of the mysterious tin box, should open it by himself, and, after examining its contents, report on them to Hardress.

This was a speculative suggestion, made by Lady Olive, seconded by Miss Chrysie, and so, perforce, agreed to. And thus it came about that all the essentials of Doctor Emil Fargeau's great discovery fell into the hands of a man who, by virtue of imagination, intellect, and scientific training, was the one man in Europe, perhaps in the world, who could either use it or abuse it to the best or worst advantage.

He took the box into his cabin, and opened it as carelessly as though it might have contained a few old love letters, or the story of some obsolete Anarchist conspiracy. But as soon as he had read the first page of the closely-written manuscript, he got up from his chair and locked the cabin door. As he went back to his seat, he caught a glimpse of his face in the mirror. It looked almost strange to him; so he stopped and looked at it again.

"Good Lord!" he muttered, "is that me?" And then he said aloud: "You infernal scoundrel!"

He didn't go back to the little table on which the manuscript was lying. He looked at the pages as a man might look at a cheque that he has just

forged. His hand, which had never trembled before, trembled as he took his cigar-case out of his pocket; and as he lit the cigar he could hardly hold the match steadily. He dropped full length on the sofa, looked sideways at the fatal sheets of paper on the table, blew a long stream of smoke up towards the port-hole, and began to talk with his own soul.

"The Empire of the World. I've read enough to see that it comes to that. Yes, Faraday was right; and so was this poor wretch that we fished out of the water this morning. A Frenchman, an Alsatian, who has made the biggest discovery that ever was made, who has practically achieved a miracle, offers the result to his country and gets refused, and then, for some reason or other, commits it and his body to the deep!

"Curious, very curious, from anything like a scientific point of view. What an infinite mercy it is for us, who have reason to believe that we possess a little brains, that the majority of men are fools, and that the official person is usually a bigger fool than the man in the street. Now, suppose our unknown and deceased genius had put even that first page that I have read before our good friend Clifford K. Vandel instead of, I suppose, the French Minister of War. Jump—why, he'd have got into it with both feet, as they say in the States. A man worth millions. Oh, millions be hanged! How many millions could buy that? Of course, that's one way of looking at it—but Frank Lamson, as I said before, you're in the way of becoming an infernal scoundrel. Perhaps I'd better interrupt this little monologue, and read the rest of what our deceased genius has to say."

He reached out and took the papers off the table, and for an hour there was silence in the cabin. He read the sheets over and over again, making rapid mental calculations all the time. Then, after a long look at the open port-hole over the sofa, he folded the sheets up, and stuffed them into the hip-pocket of his trousers. Then he got up, and looked at himself in the glass again.

"You scoundrel!" he whispered at the ghastly image of himself. "You thief—you utter sweep—who would accept the hospitality of an old college chum, and then, when the possibility of illimitable millions, when the empire of the earth, the means of enslaving the whole human race, the absolute control of every civilised Power on earth, gets fished up by accident out of the waters of the English Channel, you think about robbing him of it. You are not fit to live, much less to——"

He flung himself down on the sofa again, with his hands clasped hard over his brow, and there he remained, without moving a limb, until he was called out of his waking dream by a rap on the cabin door and the sound of Hardress's voice saying:

"Come now, Lamson, buck up! Are you going to be all the morning getting through that tin box? The women folk are on the point of mutiny with curiosity to know what there is in it. Hurry up!" And then, with a sudden drop in the tone "You're not ill, old man, are you?"

"All right, Hardress," he replied, in a voice which, by a supreme effort of will, he managed to keep steady. "I have had a bit of a shock—heart, I

think. I wish you'd tell Evans to bring me a brandy-and-soda, will you?"

As he said this, he unlocked the cabin door, and as his host saw him he exclaimed:

"My dear fellow, you do look bad; sit down, and I'll get you the B.-and-S. myself in a moment."

He disappeared, and Lamson sat down again on the sofa. Again he looked up at the open port-hole. There were only a few moments left him now to decide what might really be the fate of the human race. No man had ever been face to face with such a tremendous responsibility before. No mortal had ever passed through such a terrible temptation as he had done during the last hour. Should he fling the priceless papers, the warrant for the mastery of the world, into the sea and be done with it? Should he keep them in his pocket and make untold millions out of the power that they placed in his hands? After all, he had discovered this priceless treasure-trove. But for him it would have been buried with the hideous relics of humanity lying in the forward hold sewn up in a canvas sack. Was it not his by right? Did any human law compel him to share it with anyone.

But, again, ought he or anyone else to be entrusted with such a tremendous power for good or evil as this?—the power, literally, to reduce mankind to slavery. He was a man of average morals himself; he had lived a clean, hard, studious life, and no man could say that he had done him a mean action. Hardress, too, was well up to the high standard of the British aristocracy—but his partner had married an American girl—the daughter of a man who had made

millions out of railway developments after the Civil War. He was either in love or falling in love with the daughter of another American millionaire who had made his millions out of electrical storage. The first thing Hardress would do would be to take the papers over to America and put them before him. Clifford Vandel would grasp their gigantic possibilities instantly, a trust, commanding millions of capital, would be formed, and the world would become an American dependency.

"Here you are, old man," said Hardress, coming into the cabin with a long glass in his hand, "I've made it pretty stiff, because you look as if you wanted it. Why, what's the matter?"

Lamson took the glass, and as he put it to his lips Hardress saw his hand tremble and heard the glass rattle against his teeth. He drained it in two gulps, put it down on the table beside the sofa, threw himself back on the cushions at the end, looked once more at the open port-hole with the fate of a world on his soul, and said in a shaking voice:

"Lock the door, Hardress, and sit down. I've something to say to you."

"Why, my dear chap, what's up? You look positively ghastly," said the Viscount, as he closed the door and locked it.

"I don't suppose you'd look much better if you'd spent an hour in hell, as I have."

"An hour in— Oh, come now, old fellow," Hardress interrupted, with a look which Lamson instantly interpreted as a query as to his sanity. "Don't you think you'd better turn in for a bit? You really do look ill; just as if something had

shaken you up very badly. Is it anything to do with that infernal tin box?" he went on, pointing to it on the table.

"Yes," said Lamson, pulling himself together with a struggle, and sitting up on the sofa. "I wish to heaven I hadn't got up just at that moment on the bridge and we'd left our unknown deceased to the mercy of the waves. But, even then, somebody else might have discovered it."

"Discovered what? The corpse?"

"Yes; and —— Look here, Hardress, I've been horribly tempted—tempted, perhaps, as no other man ever was; but my father was a gentleman, and I'll do the straight thing. How would you like to be master of the world?"

"Master of the— Oh, look here, Lamson, this won't do at all, you know. You're as pale as a ghost; your eyes are burning, and your hands are shaking. You must have got a touch of fever, or something of that sort. Take a dose of quinine and turn in. We'll be at Southampton in two or three hours, and then you can see a doctor."

Lamson laughed. It was a laugh that wouldn't have done anybody much good to hear, and Hardress shivered a little as he heard it.

"I see what you mean. You think I'm a bit off my head. To tell you the truth, I almost wish I were, or that this infernal thing were only a dream —nightmare, I should say."

"What thing?"

"This," replied Lamson, putting his hand into his hip-pocket and pulling out some crumpled sheets of paper. "You thought I was mad when I asked you

if you'd like to be master of the world. When you've read that you'll see that you can be. They're what I found in that tin box. There's no name or address or any mark of identification on them, but they were written by a man, a Frenchman, who has discovered a means, as one might say, of soaking up all the electricity of the earth in one huge storage system, and then doling it out to the peoples of the earth like gas or water or electric light."

"Great Scott, what a gorgeous idea!" exclaimed Hardress, jumping from his seat and holding out his hand for the papers. "Why do you want to get ill over a thing like that, man? Don't you see there are millions in it if it's true, and of course you'll come in on the ground-floor? Great Cæsar's ghost! It'll be the very thing for old Vandel. The Morgan Steel Trust won't be in it with this."

"I thought you'd say that," said Lamson. "That's the American blood talking in you. Now, I'll tell you candidly that I've only given you those papers from a sense of honour and friendship. I admit that my first impulse was to throw them out of the port-hole; and my second," he went on, after a little pause, "was to keep them to myself, and tell you some lie about the box being empty."

"You might have done the first, old man, but you couldn't have done the second," replied Hardress, putting the papers into his hand. "There, take them back; I don't suppose I should understand them. Anyhow, you can make a better use of them than I can; and if there's anything in it we'll share alike. In fact, after all, the whole thing really belongs to you, for if you hadn't discovered

the body, it might have drifted around till it went down to feed the fishes. Really, I don't see what there is to be so upset about in it."

"My dear fellow, hasn't it struck you yet," said Lamson, "that if this discovery works out all right, as I'm certain it will, it will really mean, as I said just now, the mastery of the world? For instance, to put the thing into a nut-shell: Here we are, on this seven-hundred-ton yacht of yours, steaming at a speed of eighteen or twenty knots, engines working smoothly, and so on. Now, if this man's scheme were put into practice, the *Nadine* would be, as I might say, for want of a better word, electrolised. That is to say, every atom of metal in her would lose its tone; the boilers would burst, the engines fly to pieces, and even the hull would splinter up into a thousand fragments, just as though she were made of glass, and she got hit with a hundred sledge-hammers at the same minute."

"Is that really so, Lamson? Are you quite serious?" said Hardress, gravely, for he was just beginning to grasp the enormous possibilities of the discovery. "Do you really mean to say that that is actually feasible? Of course, I know what a swell you are at these subjects, and I don't suppose for a moment that you would say it if you didn't believe it; but are you quite sure that your—well, that this scientific imagination that I've heard you talk about hasn't run away with you?"

"My dear Hardress," replied Lamson, getting up from the couch, "there is no imagination whatever about this. I can assure you it is just a matter of hard facts and figures. Whoever that

poor fellow was that we're going to bury at Southampton, it's quite certain that the world has lost one of its most brilliant physical scholars. The man who discovered this scheme and worked it out in these papers was a second Newton or Faraday. In short, I can tell you in all seriousness—I will pledge my reputation, such as it is—that, granted the necessary capital, which would certainly run to a million or two, I could work this scheme out myself. I could construct works that would mop up the electricity out of the earth as a sponge takes water. I could change climates as I pleased. I could hurl my thunders where I chose like a very Jove. I could make myself arbiter of life and death on earth. In fact, I could be everything that a mortal ought not to be."

"There; I can't say that I quite agree with you," said Hardress. "Personally, I can't see why a man shouldn't be all that he can be, and there's no reason why you and I and the governor and Chrysie's dad shouldn't syndicate this business and run the earth. You say it's possible. That's good enough for me. We'll find the millions and you'll find the brains, so we'll consider that settled. Fancy picking a thing like that up out of the sea on a pleasure cruise! Talk about luck! Well, come along; let's go and break it as gently as we can to the girls."

CHAPTER V

THE *Nadine* had been lying for a fortnight in Southampton Water, and all that was mortal of the man who might have been master of the world was resting in a nameless grave in the cemetery.

In the oak-panelled dining-room of Orrel Court, an old rambling mansion, dating partly from Reformation times, and standing on the lower slopes of the South Downs overlooking the distant Solent, there was a little dinner-party in the process of eating, drinking, and chatting, which was a good deal more pregnant with the fate of nations than many a Cabinet meeting.

At the head of the long, massive table sat a man of a little over fifty, tall and rather squarely built, and still erect. A man, still handsome and capable of attracting the attention and even the admiration of many fair ladies, who would have been only too glad to occupy the place at the other end of the table which was now occupied by the owner of the *Nadine*, for Harry Shafto Hardress, eighth Earl of Orrel, came of one of the oldest and proudest stocks in the country, and, thanks to the millions which his dead American wife had brought him, the broad, fat acres that he owned in half-a-dozen counties were absolutely unencumbered, and he possessed a personal fortune that yielded more than twice his goodly rent-roll.

Miss Chrysie Vandel sat at his right hand, and, next to her, Doctor Lamson, faced by Lady Olive and a tall, angular, square-headed, keen-featured man of about the Earl's own age, with a heavy, well-trained, iron-grey, moustache, and an equally well-ordered, little tuft of hair on the square chin. This was Clifford K. Vandel, President of the Empire State Electric Storage and Transmission Trust of New York and Buffalo. He was commonly known throughout the States and Europe as the Lightning King; and he controlled not only the power distribution, but also the whole system of Etherography or wireless telegraphy throughout the Continent of North America.

He had come over post-haste from New York in response to an urgent cable from Lord Orrel. He was an uncle of the late Lady Orrel, and he and the Earl had already done a good deal of business together on both sides of the Atlantic. The cablegram had contained the words "urgent business," so he had taken the first available steamer and arrived in Southampton that afternoon.

During dinner only ordinary topics had been touched upon, but when the cloth was removed and the butler, with a ceremonious care that was almost reverential, had placed the ancient decanters and jugs containing the port and claret and Madeira, for which the cellars of Orrel Court had long been famous, his lordship told him that they were not to be disturbed until he rang; and, when the door had closed behind him, he said:

"Well, now, Vandel, we can talk. Miss Chrysie, a glass of port—allow me—and, if you will, pass

the decanter. Mr Lamson, this is the same seal as before. Olive, you will make the coffee later on, won't you, in that patent concern of yours? You certainly do it much better than they do downstairs; and I don't see why for once we shouldn't have our smoke here, since our—what is it they say?—revolting daughters both indulge."

"Revolted, if you don't mind, my lord," remarked Miss Chrysie across her wine-glass. "Though I don't see much what Olive and I want to revolt for; and I guess if two girls ever had more easily managed poppas they'd be curiosities. What do you say poppa? You haven't tried to run me much, have you?"

The iron-faced man of millions, the commander-in-chief of armies of hand and brain workers, the ruthless wrecker of industries which stood in the way of the realisation of his gigantic schemes, looked smilingly at the living likeness of his dead wife, and said, with that soft intonation and hardly perceptible accent which evidenced his old Southern descent:

"Well, Chrysie, I don't know that either of you ever wanted very much running; and as for smoking, well, your mothers and grandmothers did it down South two generations ago, and I guess what was good enough for the South in those days is good enough for anywhere else."

From which speech it may be gathered that Clifford Kingsley Vandel was one of those Americans who, although he had come in with the Union, and made many millions out of it, still cherished the traditions of the old Southern aristocracy. In fact, in his heart of hearts, no man, saving only

perhaps Louis Xavier de Condé and his present host, had a greater contempt for all democratic institutions than he had; a contempt which is amply shared by nine out of ten of the dollar despots of the great Republic.

He helped himself to a glass of the pale ruby-coloured port, and passed the decanter to Hardress. Lady Olive was taking claret.

"And now," said Lord Orrel, raising his glass, "suppose we begin in the good old-fashioned way. Here's success to the Storage Trust and all its future developments."

"Which, from what I've heard of them, will be big and go far," said the Lightning King.

"Even unto the running of the earth, and all that therein is. Is that good American, Chrysie?"

"Not quite," she laughed, in reply. "I must say that your ladyship seems to have considerable difficulty in picking up the American language. However, the sentiment's all right, so we'll let it go at that. What do you say, Doctor? Somehow you don't seem quite as enthusiastic about this as a man who knows everything might be."

"If a man knew everything, Miss Vandel," replied Lamson, rather gravely, "he would probably be enthusiastic about nothing. Still, I confess that, as I said at first on board the yacht, I do look upon this scheme, splendid and all as it is, and perfectly feasible from the scientific point of view, as something just a little too splendid for human responsibility. After all, you know, to make oneself the arbiter of human destiny, supreme lord of earth and air, dispenser of life and death, health and sickness,

is what is popularly described as a somewhat large order."

"Well," chimed in Miss Chrysie, "I guess if it enables you to reform the British climate, by way of a start, and give this unhappy country some weather instead of just a lot of ragged-edged samples, you'll not begin badly."

"And if we can also do something with the furious, untamed, American blizzard," laughed Hardress, nodding at her over his glass, "we shall also confer a certain amount of blessing upon a not inconsiderable proportion of the Anglo-Saxon race. What's your idea, Mr Vandel?"

"We could do about as well without them as London could do without fog, or the British farmer do without a week of January shifted on into May," replied the Lightning King. "I've often thought that a syndicate which could control the British climate, and educate your farmers and railroads into something like commonsense, would make quite big money. Maybe that's what we'll do later on."

"An excellent idea," laughed Lord Orrel. "I have suffered from both of them—as well as from our free-trading amateur politicians who make it as expensive for me to bring a ton of my own wheat from Yorkshire to London as to import a ton of yours from Chicago. However, we shall be able to alter that later on. And now, suppose Olive brews the coffee, and we have a cigar, and then, perhaps, Mr Lamson will oblige us by shedding the light of his knowledge on the subject before the meeting. I suppose, Mr Lamson, you have not found, on more mature study of the question, that there are any

serious objections to the scheme, saving, of course, the one which your modesty has created?"

"No, Lord Orrel," he replied, with one of his grave smiles. "During the last week or so I have worked out, I think, every possible development of the scheme, and I am bound to say that the unknown genius whom we buried the other day has left nothing to chance. There is not even a speculation. Everything is fact, figure, and demonstration. Given the capital, and the concessions from the Canadian Government, there does not appear to me the remotest chance of failure. The ultimate consequences of putting the scheme into practice are, of course, quite another affair—but on that subject you already have my opinion."

"My dear Lamson," said Hardress, "that, if you will pardon me saying so, is merely one of the characteristic failings of the scientific intellect. It has too much imagination, and therefore looks too far ahead."

"I'm with you there, Viscount," said the Lightning King. "This is just a question of dollars first, last, and all the time. Of course, we've got to see the other side of it; but we're not concerned much with what there is beyond—or back of beyond, for that matter. So, as practical men, we'll just respect the doctor's scruples all they deserve, and take all the help he can give us."

"Exactly," said Lord Orrel; "you put the case with your usual terseness, Vandel. And now, if you won't have any more wine, Olive will give us some coffee, and we may light up and get to business."

"And, Lamson, you will consider yourself on deck for the present," added Hardress. "I can see that

Mr Vandel is just dying to know the details, in spite of that cast-iron self-control of his."

"My dear Viscount," laughed the multi-millionaire, "I'm among friends, and I'm not controlling any just now. Still, I'll admit that I'm just about as anxious to know the details of this scheme as Chrysie was to try on her first ball-dress, and that was no small circumstance, I tell you."

"I should think not," laughed Lady Olive. "There's only one thing more important in life than that, and that's a wedding-dress. But if these people are going to immerse themselves in facts and figures, Chrysie, suppose we have our coffee up in my room. I want to have a good talk with you about the presentation dresses."

"An even more weighty subject," laughed Hardress, "than the wedding-dress—which may never be worn. I mean, of course——"

"I guess I wouldn't try and explain, Viscount," said Miss Chrysie, as she got up and went towards the door. "Wasn't it your Lord Beaconsfield who said that the most dreary duty of humanity was explanation? Reckon you'll find it pretty dreary work explaining that remark away."

Hardress looked distinctly uncomfortable, for there was a flush on Miss Chrysie's cheeks, and a glint in her eyes which, although they made her look distractingly pretty, were not of great promise to him.

"I'm awfully sorry——" he began.

"My dear Shafto," laughed Lady Olive, as Lamson opened the door for them, "don't attempt it. A man who could make a remark like that could not possibly improve the situation by an apology."

With that they disappeared, and Lamson shut the door. When he got back to his seat he took a lot of papers out of the breast-pocket of his coat, put his plate aside, laid them on the table, and said:

"Well, then, since I am in the chair, I may as well get to business. As Mr Vandel has not yet been made fully acquainted with the details of the scheme, perhaps it will be as well if I begin at the beginning."

"Quite so," said Lord Orrel, with a nod; "and your kindness will have the additional effect of refreshing my own memory, which, I must admit, is not a particularly good one for technicalities."

Then Doctor Lamson began, and for a couple of hours or so expounded with every possible exactness of detail the discovery made by the man whose mangled remains had been picked up by the *Nadine* in mid-Channel, and which might have made France mistress of the world.

When he had finished, they went into the library, where they were joined by Lady Olive and Miss Chrysie, and the conversation gradually drifted away into topics more socially interesting, but of less imperial importance. But when Clifford Kingsley Vandel went to bed that night he spent half-an-hour or more walking up and down his big, thickly-carpeted bedroom, with his hands clasped behind his back, his eyes fixed on the floor, and his lips shaping inarticulate words which would have been worth millions to anyone who could have heard them. Then he stopped his promenade, undressed, and got into bed, and just before he dismissed the whole subject from his perfectly-trained intellect and addressed himself to the necessary business of sleep, he said:

"Well, that's just about the biggest scheme that mortal man ever had a chance of bringing to a head; and I guess we'll do it. Masters of the world, givers of life or death, lords of the nations, makers of peace or war as we please! That's so, and now, Clifford Vandel, I have the honour to wish you a very good night — a very good night indeed—about the best night you've ever had."

And then the masterful brain ceased working, like an engine from which the steam had been shut off, and he fell asleep as quickly and as peacefully as a little child.

CHAPTER VI

MISS CHRYSIE'S European visit had come to an end, and she and her father had accepted Hardress's invitation to take a trip home in the *Nadine*. Doctor Lamson was also a guest on board, and during the trip many of the details of the great scheme were exhaustively discussed. Each of the three men was going on a special mission. Clifford Vandel had definitely accepted the position of president and general financial and business manager of the International Magnetic Control Syndicate, as the newly-formed company had been provisionally named. He was going to the States to do the necessary financial part of the work, buy up rights and patents which might be necessary to the furtherance of the scheme, and to perfect the organisation of the great combine of which he was president—a combine whose influence was now to extend not only over the United States, but over the whole world.

Doctor Lamson was going to make a personal study of the electrical machinery to be found in the States, so that he might be in a position to design the great storage works to the best advantage and with the greatest possible economy of time and money.

Hardress, armed with introductions from the highest official sources in England, was going north-

ward, after leaving his guests at New York, to Montreal, to obtain a lease of a few square miles of the desolate, ice-covered wilderness of Boothia Felix, which, as a glance at the map will show you, is the most northerly portion of the mainland of the American continent. Further, in its scanty history, you may read that there Sir John Ross discovered the magnetic pole of the earth, and named the wilderness after his friend Sir Felix Booth, who had furnished most of the funds for his expedition.

His ostensible object in obtaining the lease was the foundation of an observatory for the examination of magnetic and electrical phenomena; one of which was the possible solution of the so far unsolved riddle of the Northern Lights. He also stated to the Dominion authorities, by way of giving something like a practical air to his mission, that a remoter possibility of the scheme was the establishment of a magnetic centre for a world-wide system of wireless telegraphy.

The few square miles of ice and snow and rock were absolutely worthless, and so the Dominion Government had not the slightest hesitation in accepting his offer of a thousand a year for ten years for the exclusive use and possession of the peninsula, with right to import materials, construct works, and do whatever might be necessary for the development of the scheme.

If he had not been the heir to an ancient peerage and the son of one of the wealthiest men in England, he would probably have been looked upon as a harmless crank who was wanting to lose his money in a vain attempt to harness the electrical energy

displayed in the *Aurora borealis* and make thunderstorms to order out of it. As it was, he was treated indulgently as a man who had big ideas, and who was conducting at his own expense a great scientific experiment which he could very well afford to pay for.

Thus, after very brief negotiations, consisting of one or two interviews, two or three dinners, and the handing over of a cheque, the Canadian Government in all innocence parted with what was soon to prove the most precious piece of land, not only on the American Continent, but in the whole world.

But this was not the only concession that Shafto Hardress took back to England with him. For when he returned to New York and took a run up to Buffalo on the Empire State Express, with the lease of Boothia Land in his pocket, to talk matters over with President Vandel, he had a brief but momentously interesting interview with Miss Chrysie, at the close of which she said, as her hand rested in his:

"Well, Viscount, I'm not going to say 'Yes' right away. You're a gentleman, and I like you. You're going to be a peer of England some day, and, if this scheme of yours works out all right, one of the masters of the world. As my father's daughter I have no natural objection to being a peeress of England and mistress of the world, but I am also a natural-born woman, and I want a little more than that—I mean something that a man could not give me if he owned the Solar System. I want to know for certain that you love me as a man should love a woman, and that I can love you as a woman should

love a man if she is going to marry him. I like you; yes, I like you better than any other man I've ever seen. I tell you quite honestly it hasn't been a case of love at first sight with me, and I guess I haven't known you quite long enough to give you something that I can never take back. Go to your work and do it, and while you're doing it we shall get to know each other better, and meanwhile you may consider that you have the option of another piece of half-discovered territory."

Before releasing her hand he stooped and kissed it, saying, with a laugh that bespoke a certain amount of satisfaction:

"That, you know, is—well, we will call it the seal on the contract. This is my act and deed, you understand—as people say when they conclude a contract with an option. A definition of kissing which I once read describes it as equivalent to syllabus."

"Syllabus!" she said, releasing her hand and raising it to her brow, pushing a fold of hair back by the motion and smiling up at him in a somewhat disconcerted fashion. "And what might that mean in your dictionary of kisses?"

"It was defined as kissing the hand of the girl you want very badly instead of——"

Her red lips smiled an irresistible challenge at him, and the next instant his arm was round her waist, and he said:

"After all, I don't think that contract was properly signed, sealed, and delivered; at least, the seal was in the wrong place, and the delivery was not quite complete."

"Now I call that real mean, Viscount," she said,

a moment afterwards. "I only gave you an option on the territory, and you're starting to occupy it right away."

"Well, then," he said, taking her hand again, "suppose, instead of the territory, we call it a reserve. How will that do?"

"Not quite," she said, drawing back a bit. "To some extent I've been taken by assault, but I've not surrendered at discretion yet. That sounds a bit mixed, I know—but it's pretty near the truth."

"And at that," he said, gravely smiling, "I am quite content to leave it." And so, with the magical touch of her lips still thrilling through his blood, he left her, more than ever determined to fulfil to the utmost the tremendous destiny which chance had cast in his way.

To him there could have been no more delightfully satisfactory ending to his mission. In blood he was himself half-American, and in him the old-world aristocrat was strangely blended with the keen, far-seeing, quick-witted, hard-headed, and perhaps, in one sense, hard-hearted man of business. It was to this side of his nature that the physical charms, the keen wit, and sprightly spirit of Miss Chrysie had first appealed; but later on the aristocrat in him had recognised that she too was a patrician of the New World, whose ancestry stretched back into the history of the old, and so gradually interest and admiration had grown into a love which completely satisfied all his instincts.

The very way in which she had received his proposal had increased both his love and his respect. If she had surrendered at discretion there

might have remained the possibility of a suspicion that, after all, she had been tempted to take hold of a magnificent opportunity, not only for placing herself in the front rank of European society, but also of wielding through her husband a power such as no woman had ever exercised before. But she had given him frankly to understand that these things were as nothing in her eyes, great and splendid as they were, without that certainty of mutual love which could alone induce her to give herself, body and soul, into the hands of any man, however powerful or nobly born; for Chrysie Vandel was a woman in the best sense of that much-meaning word, and she knew that for her there was no choice, save between the complete independence of thought and action which she had so far enjoyed, and an equally complete surrender to the man to whom she could render, whole-hearted and unreserved, the sweet service of love.

After dinner that night he had an equally satisfactory interview with the president, who, when he had heard his story, just got up from his chair and said:

"Viscount, we'll shake on that. My girl's free to choose where she likes, or not to choose at all, and you are not going to have any help from me in the way of persuasion; but if she does choose, why, I'd sooner she chose you than any other man I know."

"I ask for nothing better, I can assure you," said Hardress. "Thank you a thousand times."

And so they shook.

The next day by noon the *Nadine* was steaming

out past Sandy Hook. Allowing for difference in longitude, it was almost at the same moment that the night mail pulled out of the Petersburg station. Two of the sleeping-compartments were occupied by Prince Xavier de Condé and his daughter; and so, from the ends of the earth, both travelling towards an obscure little watering-place hidden away in the depths of the German forest land, were approaching each other the man and the woman whose destinies had been, all unknown to themselves, so strangely linked together by the last despairing act of the man whose country had refused to permit him to make her the mistress of the world.

CHAPTER VII

THE village of Elsenau, which has hardly yet risen to the dignity of a town, lies somewhere midway between the Hartz Mountains and the Thuringia Wald, which, as everyone knows, stretches away in undulations of wooded uplands and valleys southward to the Black Forest. Its most recent possession is the fine Hôtel Wilhelmshof — an entirely admirable creation of the German instinct for catering, facing south-west, and sheltered north and east by uplands crowned with stately pines. Southward it has smooth, new-made lawns, dotted with clumps of firs and parterres of flowers, shielded by curves of flowering bushes. The lawns slope down to the edge of a long narrow lake, which, on the evening of the day after the prince and the marquise left Petersburg, lay smooth and blue-black beneath the cloudless azure of the summer heaven.

But the principal attraction of Elsenau, which, indeed, had given the luxurious hotel its reason for existence, and which had raised the little village of charcoal-burners and woodcutters to the dignity of a Kur-anstalt, was a spring, accidentally discovered by an enterprising engineer who was looking among the mountains for a water-supply for the city of Ilmosheim, some three miles away to the south. The waters had a curious taste and a most unpleasant smell. Learned chemists and

doctors analysed them, and reported that they contained ingredients which formed a sovereign remedy for gout and rheumatism—especially the hereditary form of the first. They were bottled and sent far and wide, and soon after their qualities had been duly appreciated and commented on by the medical press of Europe and America, the Hôtel Wilhelmshof rose, as it were, with the wave of the contractor's magic wand, hard by the little limestone grotto in which the spring had been discovered.

About eight o'clock on a lovely evening in July, Lord Orrel and Lady Olive, under the broad verandah of the Wilhelmshof, sat drinking their after-dinner coffee and watching the full moon sailing slowly up over the black ridges of the pine-crowned hills which stretched away to the southward.

"I suppose the prince must have missed his train, or else the train was behind time and missed the coach," said Lord Orrel, taking out his watch. "It is rather curious that I should have met him regularly every year at Homburg or Spa or Aix, and that somehow you have never met him; and now it seems from his letter that we have both discovered this new little place of evil-smelling waters together. I am glad that he is bringing his daughter with him."

"Ah, yes; his daughter—she is the second Marie Antoinette, isn't she?" said Lady Olive, putting her cup down and taking up her cigarette. "The most beautiful woman in Europe, the last daughter of the old House of Bourbon—I mean the elder branch, of course. And the prince?"

"The first gentleman in Europe, in my opinion,"

replied the earl, flicking the ash off his cigar. "A man who, granted the possibility of circumstances which, of course, are not now possible, might mount the throne of Louis XIV., and receive the homage of all his courtiers without their knowing the difference. A great man, my dear Olive, born four generations out of his time. If he had succeeded the Grand Monarque—there would have been no French Revolution, no Napoleon——"

"And therefore, my dear papa," laughed Lady Olive, "no Peninsular War, no Wellington, no Waterloo, no Nelson, no Nile and Trafalgar, and so none of that expiring British supremacy which you were arguing about so eloquently the other day in the House of Lords."

While she was speaking, the double doors giving on to the verandah were thrown open, a lacquey, gorgeously uniformed in blue and silver, came out, with his body inclined at an angle of thirty degrees, and his arms hanging straight down, and said, in thick Swiss French:

"Your Excellency and Madame la Marquise will find Milord and Miladi on the verandah here."

As Lady Olive looked round she heard a rustle of frilled skirts on the planks of the verandah, and saw a tall, stately gentleman and the most beautiful woman she had ever seen coming towards her.

The gentleman's eyes brightened and his brows lifted as he raised his hat. The woman's face might have been a mask, and her eyes looked out upon nothingness.

"Ah, my dear prince," said the earl, rising and going towards him with outstretched hands. "De-

lighted to renew our acquaintance in a new and yet a very charming place. I was hoping that you would get here for dinner; but, of course, once off the main line, you can never trust a German train to get anywhere in time. And this is Mam'selle la Marquise, I presume. This is fortunate. You see I have my daughter Olive taking care of me, so perhaps they may help to entertain each other in this out-of-the-way place."

"Yes," replied the prince, as they shook hands, "this is my daughter of whom I have spoken to you so often; and this is yours, the Lady Olive. Mam'selle, I have the honour to salute you. Adelaide, this is the daughter of Lord Orrel—an old friend, and one of the ancienne noblesse."

Olive had risen while he was speaking; the mask melted away from the marquise's lovely face, her lips softened into a smile, and a swift gleam of scrutiny took the place of vacancy in her eyes. Lady Olive's met hers with a frank though involuntary look of challenge. She certainly was what the gossip of half-a-dozen countries called her—the most beautiful woman in Europe. She possessed an exquisite grace of form and face and manner which made her indescribable. When one woman honestly admires another it is always with a half-conceived sense either of envy or hostility. Lady Olive was herself one of the best types of an English patrician, and the blood in her veins had flowed through ten generations of the proudest lineage in Britain; but in Adelaide de Condé, the daughter of the most ancient aristocracies of France and Austria, she instinctively recognised her equal, perhaps her superior.

She put out her hand in a frank, English way, and said, in the most perfectly accented French:

"My father has told me so much about yours, and they are such good friends, that I hope it isn't possible that we can be anything else."

"Quite impossible!" smiled the marquise, taking the hand of the new-made friend who in days to come was to be an enemy. "Since our fathers are such old and good friends, why should we not be new friends and good ones too?" And then, turning round to her father, she said: "Voila, papa, since we find ourselves in such good company, and we have missed the dinner, and cannot eat till they get something ready, why do you not have your vermouth and a cigarette? In fact, as we are so entirely 'chez nous' here in this delightful retreat, you may order one for me too, I think."

The prince lifted his eyelids, and the lacquey approached and took his order, and then the party proceeded to make friends.

A little after tea the same evening, when Lady Olive and the marquise had retired to Lady Olive's sitting-room for a chat on things feminine and European, Lord Orrel and the prince were strolling up and down the moonlit lawn, smoking their cigars and exchanging the experiences that they had had since their last meeting at Homburg the year before.

Their friendship had begun by a chance acquaintance some six years before at Aix-les-Bains. Both of them aristocrats to their finger-tips, it was not long before they struck a note of common sympathy. The once splendid name which the prince bore appealed instantly to the Englishman, who could trace

his descent back to the days of the first Plantagenet, and it was not long before they found a closer bond than that of ancient ancestry.

One night, when the beach at Trouville was lit up by just such a moon as was now floating high over the pines on the hills round Elsenau, he had told the prince the story of his life—the story of an elder scion of an ancient line devoted rather to literature and the byways of science than to the political and social duties of his position, and, moreover, a man who had never found a woman whom his heart could call to his side to share it with him. He had devoted his after-college days to study and travel. His younger brother, a splendid specimen of English chivalry, had found his mate in the daughter of his father's oldest friend. He was a soldier, and when the Franco-German war broke out, nothing, not even the longing, half-reproachful looks of his betrothed, could keep him from volunteering in the French service. He had fought through the war with brilliant distinction, a private at Saarbruck and a captain during the Siege of Paris. Then, captured, badly wounded, by the Germans after a brilliant sortie, he was cured and released, only to be murdered by the communards on the eve of his return to England. A year or two after, the Earl abjured his vows of celibacy under the fascinations of a brilliant American beauty, and so had accepted the responsibility of perpetuating his race.

So these two men had met on common ground, and nothing was more natural than that they should have become such friends as they were. To a very great extent they stood apart from the traditions of

their times. They were aristocrats in an age of almost universal democracy. Both of them firmly believed that democracy spelt degeneration, national and individual. Both of them were, in fact, incarnations of an age that was past, and which might or might not be renewed.

This was, indeed, the subject of their conversation as they strolled up and down the smoothly-shaven lawn under the sheltering pines, chatting easily and comparing in well-selected phrases the things of their own youth with those of the present swiftly moving and even a trifle blatant generations of to-day.

"I quite agree with you, my dear Lord Orrel," said the prince, as they turned at the end of their walk. "Democracy is tending now, just as it did in the days of Greece and Carthage and Rome, and to-day in my own unhappy France, to degeneration, and the worst of it is that there is no visible possibility of salvation. Our rulers have armed the mob with a weapon more potent than the thunders of Jove. The loafer of the café and the pot-house has a vote, and, therefore, the same voice in choosing the rulers of nations as the student and the man of science, or the traveller who is familiar with many lands and many races. I often think that it is a pity that some means cannot be found for placing—well, I will call it a despotic power—in the hands of a few men—men, for instance, if I may say so without flattery or vanity, like ourselves—men of wide experience and broad sympathies, and yet possessing what you and I know to be the essentials of despotism — that something that can only be inherited, not acquired."

"My dear prince, I agree with you entirely," replied Lord Orrel. "Our present civilisation is suffering from a sort of dry-rot. Sentiment has degenerated into sentimentalism, courage into a reckless gambling for honours, statesmanship into politics, oratory into verbosity. In short, the nineteenth century has degenerated into the twentieth. Everything seems going wrong. The world is ruled by the big man who shots his quotations on the Stock Exchange and the little one who serves behind his counter. It is all buying and selling. Honour and faith, and the old social creed which we used to call noblesse oblige, are getting quite out of date."

"Not that yet, my friend, surely," the prince interrupted, quickly gripping his companion's arm; "not that, at least, for us. I confess that we and those like us are, as one might say, derelicts on the ocean of society — we, who one day were stately admirals, to use the old phrase. And yet, as you said just now, if only some power could be placed in the hands of a few like ourselves, a power which would over-ride the blind, irresponsible, shifting will of the mutable mob which changes its vote and its opinions with the seasons, the world might be brought again into order, and the proletariat might be saved rom its own suicide.

"And," he went on, turning at the other end of their promenade, "perhaps you will not believe me, but only a few weeks ago there was such a power in the hands of a Frenchman—of an Alsatian, perhaps I should say, but a man who had preserved his loyalty to France—a scientist of European reputation—a man who had discovered that this earth

had a spirit, a living soul, and who could gain control of it—so complete a control, that he could draw it out and leave the earth dead—a man who— But there, I am wearying you; I am sure you must think that I am telling you some fairy tale."

"By no means, my dear prince," said Lord Orrel, doing his best to keep his voice steady, and not quite succeeding. "In the first place, I am quite sure that you would not speak so seriously on a subject that was not serious; and, in the second place, I can assure you that I am most deeply interested."

"A thousand pardons, my lord," said the prince. "Of course you would not think that of me. We have both of us lived too long to indulge in romance, and yet, if I could tell you the whole story, you would say that you have never heard such a romance as this."

"And, if it is not trespassing too far upon your confidence, my dear prince, I should be only too happy to hear you tell the whole story," said his lordship, with an unmistakable note of curiosity in his tone.

"I can tell you part of the story," replied the prince; "but not here. It is so strange, and it might have meant so much, not only to France, but to the world, that I can only tell it to you where no other ears than ours can hear it, and even then only under your solemn pledge of secrecy."

"As for the first condition, my dear prince," replied Lord Orrel, "I will ask you to take a glass of wine with me in my sitting-room. As for the second, you have my word."

"And, therefore, both conditions are amply satisfied. Let us go, and I will tell you the strangest story you have ever heard."

CHAPTER VIII

By the time the prince had ceased speaking there was not the slightest doubt in Lord Orrel's mind that, in some most mysterious manner, he was connected with the discovery which Hardress had made when he took the mutilated body out of the waters of the Channel. Perhaps even the unknown dead might have been someone near and dear to him. It seemed to him utterly impossible either to doubt the prince's word or to believe that two such discoveries could have been made by two men at the same time, or even that there could exist at the same time on earth two men whose genius, once put into practice, could make them rival masters of the world.

And supposing that he knew part of the story which the prince was going to tell him—the sequel, and, from a practical point of view, the all-important portion—ought he to tell him what he knew too? He was under no actual pledge of secrecy to his associates in the great Trust, but still he felt that he was under an honourable obligation to keep the story of the discovery to himself. On the other hand, granted that the prince knew the first half, would it be right—would it be honourable, according to his own exact code of honour, to keep the sequel from him? Perhaps the prince even had a definite personal interest in the scheme; and, in that case,

to keep silence would be to rob him of his prior rights. What was he to do?

He had been a Minister of the Crown for a short term of office, and by the time they reached his sitting-room, and he had locked the door, after the wine had been placed on the table, diplomacy had come to his aid, and he had made up his mind. When he had filled the glasses he took out his cigar-case, selected the best it contained, and said:

"Prince, I'm going to ask you to allow me to take a very great liberty."

"My dear Lord Orrel, there is nothing that you could do that I should consider a liberty. Thank you, I will; I know that your cigars are always most excellent, and now we will make ourselves comfortable, and you shall take your liberty."

He took the proffered cigar as he spoke, snipped the end, and lit it. Lord Orrel did the same, and when they had saluted each other over their wine, in the old-fashioned, courtly style, he began:

"My dear prince, the liberty that I am going to ask your permission to take is a very great one, because it is a liberty of anticipation; and few men, even the most chivalrous, care to be anticipated, especially when they have an interesting story to tell. In other words, I, too, have a very strange story to tell you. In fact, the strangest that ever came within my experience. And there are reasons, which I will explain to you afterwards, why I am asking the favour of your permission to tell it before yours."

The prince looked puzzled, and his dark brows approached each other for just the fraction of a second. He took a sip at his wine, leant back in his chair, and

blew a long whiff of smoke up towards the gaudily-painted ceiling. Then he said, with a barely perceptible shrug of his shoulders:

"My dear Lord Orrel, you are not asking me any favour. On the contrary, you are merely requesting that you shall entertain me before I try to do the same by you. Moreover, as it is quite impossible that there can be any connection between our stories, there can be no question of anticipation; so, pray, proceed. I am all attention."

"As I said," began Lord Orrel, settling himself in his chair, and taking a long pull at his cigar, "the story is a very strange one, and it is also one which could not well be told from the housetops, because it involves—well, what may be something almost as wonderful as what you hinted at in the garden just now."

"Ah," interrupted the prince, with a visible start and a sudden lifting of the eyebrows, "then, in truth, it must be strange indeed; and so I am more than ever anxious to hear it; and if, as I divine, you wish me to treat it in confidence, you, of course, have my word, as a gentleman of France, that no detail of it shall ever pass my lips."

His host felt not a little relieved at being released from the necessity of binding him to secrecy, as, for the sake of his colleagues, he would have felt obliged to do; so he said:

"That, my dear prince, it would be quite impossible to imagine; and now, as it is getting a little late, I will get to my story."

He began with the finding of the mutilated body by the *Nadine*, and the discovery of the tin box

containing the momentous papers, and had just given a sketch of their contents and the use that was about to be made of the dead man's discovery when the prince, whose face had been growing greyer and greyer during the recital, at length lost his hold upon the stern control under which he had just placed himself. He sprang to his feet, flung his arms apart, and cried, in a high-pitched, half-choked voice:

"Mon Dieu! mon Dieu! It is the same!—what miracle has happened? My lord, you have been telling me the end of the story of which I was going to tell you the beginning. And so France, poor France, through the stupidity of the ministerial puppets that the mob has placed in the seats of their ancient rulers, has refused the sceptre of the world; and I—I, the heir of her ancient royal house, have lost not only the throne of my ancestors, but the power to make her the mistress of the nations. Truly, the mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceeding small. Her kings misruled her, and she took other rulers, who have cheated and swindled her, and humbled her before those who once did her bidding; and now, when the hand of Fate holds out the means of regaining all that she has lost, and more, infinitely more, she puts it aside with the sneering laugh of contemptuous ignorance. Truly it is a judgment that judges even unto the third and fourth generation. Ah, yes; and on me, too!—I, who am innocent! Mon Dieu, mon Dieu, it is cruel!"

As the last words came from his trembling lips his hands came together on his forehead, and he dropped back into his chair.

For a moment of speechless astonishment Lord Orrel stared across the room at him. Then, dropping his cigar on the tray, he got up and went and laid his hand on the prince's shoulder.

"My dear prince, my dear friend," he said, in a voice moved by emotion, "I am most deeply distressed that my story should have affected you so painfully. Believe me, I had no intention, no thought even——"

The prince dropped his hands from his head, and stood and faced him, his face white and set and his eyes burning; but with a perfectly steady voice, he said:

"My lord, I thank you. So much emotion, though perhaps it was natural, ought not to have been shown. I should not have permitted it to myself, save in solitude. It was impossible that I should know that your lordship's story was the same as mine, and so, naturally, the shock was greater. And now, may I ask your lordship one question?"

"I will answer it, prince, before you ask it," interrupted Lord Orrel. "But first, let me beg of you to drink your wine; really, you do not look well."

The prince took the glass from him and drained it in silence, his hand shaking ever so little as he held it to his lips. and the other went on:

"Knowing what I did, I felt certain that two such miracles could not have happened at the same time; moreover, some inspiration told me that the discovery you spoke of in the garden was the same that my son made under such terrible circumstances in the Channel. Now, sit down, pray, do, and let us talk this matter over as men of the world."

...sty, you who would found a new one-
housand times harder, a dynasty of mo
od, the most soulless and brutal of all
, well, it is fate, and who shall ques
; if you will pardon me, my dear Orr
talk further upon this subject, to-nig
e. I confess that what you have tol
cted me deeply. If you will permit r
to bed. The Russians, you know, have
ake thy thoughts to bed with thee, for the
wiser than the evening.' To-morrow, p
ll be able to converse with you on this mo
tter more calmly than I could do to-night.
By all means, my dear prince," was th
ld, no doubt, such a course would be b
too, for I admit that this extraordina
nce has upset me not a little as well.
d-night, and sound sleep."
Ah, yes," replied the prince, as they sho
e door; "sound sleep. I hope so. Go
ord, and pleasant dreams of the

may go to bed. If I require you in the night I will knock on the wall, as usual."

"Bien, monseigneur," replied the valet, opening the door and bowing. "J'ai l'honneur de vous sous haiter le bon soir, monseigneur."

"Bon soir," replied the prince, as he passed on to his room. "Le chocolat a huit heures."

But Xavier de Condé, Prince of Bourbon, would never drink another cup of chocolate. As soon as his door closed behind him, a sternly-repressed flood of passion broke out, and he spent half the remainder of the night walking, in his stockinged feet, up and down his big bedchamber, with clenched teeth and tight-gripped hands, his brain seething with a thousand thoughts of passion, and his white, twitching lips shaping unspoken words of rage, bitterness, and despair. It was a cruel irony that Fate had wrought on him and his ancient house. The possible sceptre of the world had been offered to his hereditary enemies, the Republicans of France, and, if Fargeau had held to his compact, the compact for which he had given his daughter to his son, he would have been master of France; and Fargeau would have kept it, for he was a loyal Frenchman; and his son would have married a future Queen of France! And now not only had France refused the sceptre and snatched the crown from him, but the sceptre had passed by some bitter caprice of Fate into the hands of France's hereditary enemies. What could he say or do? Nothing. It was maddening—worse than maddening. He had pledged his honour, and could tell no one—but even if he could, what then? The secret was out—worse—it was in the hands of

men who could make the ideal a reality. They could not even give him back the power if they would, for the knowledge was theirs already, and they could act on it while he could not.

The more he thought the faster the fever that was burning in his blood increased. His lips and tongue grew parched. His steps grew irregular and faltering. The veins in his head were beating on his brain like sledge-hammers. The lights began to waver before his eyes. He felt instinctively that madness—that long-inherited curse of his race—was coming. What if he should really go mad and babble not only of this great secret, but also of all the plots and intrigues of which he had been the centre! How many devoted friends and adherents would be consigned to prison and exile—perhaps even to the scaffold! The very thought chilled him back into sanity for the time being. He rapped sharply at the wall, and presently Felix appeared, half-dressed, and doing his best to stifle a yawn.

"Felix," said the prince, who was now sitting in his arm-chair with his head between his hands, "bid Marie arouse mam'selle immediately, and request her to dress and come to me. I am unwell—another of my attacks, I fear—and she only knows what to do for me. Quick—I need her at once."

Felix vanished, and within ten minutes the marquise was in her father's room; but by this time the blood was beating on his brain again, and the fierce light of insanity was beginning to dawn in his eyes.

With the valet's help she partly undressed him and got him to bed. Then she locked the door

and braced herself for what she instinctively knew must be a terrible ordeal.

She saw at a glance that some terrible shock had thrown his brain off its balance. She had plotted with him and for him, and she knew why it was her duty to lock the door. But what was this? Whence had come this blow which had struck him down so swiftly? She soon learnt, as the disjointed words and fragmentary sentences were shaped in the struggle between sanity and delirium for the command of his brain. Hour after hour it went on, a piteous jumble of the memories of a long, busy life; but in the end, out of the mental tangle she was able to unravel one clear thread of thought. Emil Fargeau had given his secret to the sea, and the sea had given it into the hands of the English, the ancient enemies of her country and her race; and it was the son of this Lord Orrel, the brother of the haughty English beauty sleeping here, under the same roof, who had re-discovered it, and they were even worse than English, they were half-American; and England and America would between them share that empire of the world, that mastery of the human race, which should have been her father's and hers. She had even permitted her troth to be sold to a simple officer in the German army, a spy in the enemy's camp, in order to purchase this new sovereignty for her house.

The prince was rapidly sinking; she could see that, and yet she was helpless to save him, for she had promised that no one, not even a doctor, should be admitted into the room. She gave him a dose of an opiate which he always carried with him, and

about dawn he was sleeping, but every now and then talking in his sleep more coherently. At sunrise the effect of the drug wore off, and delirium resumed its sway for a few moments. His eyes opened, and with a sudden jerk he sat up in bed, his eyes glaring at the opposite wall, and his fingers clutching and tearing at the bedclothes. His lips worked convulsively for a while, then, with a hoarse, croaking scream he died.

"France! O ma belle France, maitresse du monde —et moi ton roi, ton—ah——!"

His voice dropped suddenly in a low, soft sigh, his eyelids fell, and his arms shrank to his sides, and he rolled back into his daughter's arms. The fresh rush of blood to his head had broken a vessel on the brain.

Adelaide knew instinctively that the dead weight in her arms was not that of a living man. She laid him back on the pillows, called up Felix and sent him for the resident physician. When he had made his examination, he said, in his guttural French:

"Mam'selle la Marquise, there is no hope. The prince is dead. If I had been called earlier I might have done something. I will make an examination afterwards and certify the cause of death, according to law. Accept my most respectful condolences."

That evening Shafto Hardress arrived from Paris at the Hôtel Wilhelmshof.

CHAPTER IX

IN the midst of the desolation which had so swiftly and unexpectedly fallen upon her, the help and solace even of those whom she now knew to be her enemies—enemies perhaps to the death—were very welcome to Adelaide de Montpensier. Every sort of trouble that could be taken off her hands they relieved her of. Hardress travelled to Vienna. which the prince had made his headquarters, to interview his man of business and to escort back the prince's sister, Madame de Condé, Princess of Bourbon, who was now, save Adelaide, the only representative of the older branch of the ancient line. The younger had bowed the knee to the Republican Baal in France, and they were not even notified of the prince's death.

Lord Orrel undertook the arrangement of the funeral and all the legal formalities connected with it, and Lady Olive was so sweet and tender in her help and sympathy that, in the midst of her grief, Adelaide began to love her in spite of herself.

The funeral was without any display that might have signalised the rank of the dead man, and Louis Xavier de Condé, Prince of Bourbon, was laid to rest in an ordinary brick grave on the hillside under the pines of Elsenau. Both Adelaide and her aunt would have applied to the French authorities to permit his interment in the resting-place of his ancestors,

but the old prince had given special instructions that while the Republican banner waved over France not even his dead body should rest in her soil, and so his wishes were, perforce, respected.

The night after the funeral the marquise was sitting at her writing-table before the window of her private sitting-room. The window looked out over a vast expanse of undulating forest land, broken here and there by broad grassy valleys through which ran little tributaries of the Weser, shining like tiny threads of silver under the full moon riding high in the heavens.

She had drawn the blind up, and for nearly half-an-hour she had been gazing dreamily out over the sombre, almost ghostly landscape. The deep gloom of the far-spreading pine forest harmonised exactly with her own mood, and yet the twinkle of the streams amidst the glades, and the glitter of the stars on the far-off horizon, were to her as symbols of a light shining over and beyond the present darkness of her soul.

The night had fallen swiftly and darkly upon her. First the vanishing into impenetrable mystery of the man upon whom rested her hopes and dreams of one day queening it over France as her ancestress Marie Antoinette had done, and not only over France as a kingdom, but as mistress of the world. And now the veil of mystery had been rudely torn aside, and showed her these English and Americans, the hated hereditary enemies of her house and country, in possession of the power which should have been hers. Then, last and worst of all, her father and her friend, the only real friend she had

ever had, the only human being she had ever really loved—for she barely remembered the mother who had died when she was scarcely out of her cradle —had been stricken down by the same blow that had fallen upon her, and lay yonder on the hillside under the pines, all his high hopes and splendid ambitions brought to nothing by the swift agony of a single night.

There was an open book on the table before her—a square volume, daintily bound in padded Russia-leather, and closed with a silver spring lock. A gold-mounted stylographic pen lay beside it, and she held between her fingers a little cunningly contrived silver key which she had just detached from her watch-chain.

"Shall I write it," she murmured, in a soft, low tone, "or shall I keep it hidden where no human eyes can read it? But who can ever read this?" she went on after a little pause, letting her hand fall on the square volume. "After all, are not all my secrets here? and is not this the only friend and confidant that I have now left to me? Yes, I am a woman, when all is said; and I must open my heart to someone, if only to myself."

She turned the little shaded lamp by her side so that the light fell on the volume, and she put the key in the lock and opened it. About half the pages were filled with writing—not in words, but in a kind of shorthand which could only be read by her father, herself, and three of the most trusted adherents of their lost cause. Her eyes ran rapidly over the last few pages. They contained the last chapters in the book of her life which was now

closed. Before she reached the end a mist of tears was gathering in her long, dark lashes. She wiped it away with a little lace-edged handkerchief, and took up her pen. She scored two heavy lines across the bottom of the last written page, turned over a fresh one, and began to write.

"My father is dead, and with him the dreams which for years we have dreamt together. Was there ever a more cruel irony of Fate than this? Was Fate itself ever more unkind to man or woman? Only a few weeks ago, and I had sold myself, with his consent, so far did our devotion go to serve the sacred cause of our house, to this big, handsome Alsatian—a servant of the German Emperor, the arch-enemy of our country, the owner of the two provinces which my ancestor Louis tore from Germany. I did it because in high politics it is necessary sometimes to sacrifice onself, partly too because no other man had appealed to me as he did. I knew that he was running tremendous risks; I believed—yes, and I still believe, that he was risking everything—rank, honour, liberty, even life itself, by wearing the uniform of his country's enemy so that he might learn his enemy's secrets.

"He loves me—yes, if ever man loved woman, he loves me—me, Adelaide de Condé, Marquise de Montpensier; and I—ah, mon Dieu, is it possible that the daughter of Marie Antoinette has sunk so low?—I allowed him to believe that I loved him too. He believes it now. I suppose he would still believe it, even if he knew what I know now—that his father is dead, that the secret of the world-empire which he could have given us, that power for which I pro-

mised myself to him, so that I might share it with him, has gone, that it is worse than lost, since the Fates have given it into the hands of the enemies of our house.

"And so it is gone—worse than gone—and so, my friend Victor, I am afraid you will have to find out in the course of circumstances that a woman's smiles do not always mean a reflection of the light in her lover's eyes, and that her kisses do not always mean love. It is a pity, because, after all, I believe you are a true Frenchman, even if you wear a German uniform; and if that dream had become a reality, and you and I had shared the throne of France, perhaps I should have loved you as well and as truly as most queens have loved their consorts.

"But, alas, my poor Victor, the sceptre has passed away—for the time being, at least—from the House of Bourbon. It is given into the hands of our enemies, and so you, by force of fate, must stand aside. I shall not tell you this yet, because afterwards, perhaps, you may be useful. I wonder what you would think of me—even you, a man who in the old days would only have been a sort of slave, living or dying socially as the great Louis smiled or frowned upon you—I wonder what you would think if you could look over my shoulder and read this writing and see a woman's soul laid naked on this page. Perhaps you might think me utterly mean and contemptible—you would if you didn't understand; but if you did, if you could see all and understand all—well, then, you might hate me, but I think you would be man enough to respect me.

"At least you are diplomatist enough to know,

after all, in the great game of politics, a game that is played for the mastery of kingdoms and peoples, to say nothing of the empire of the world, women have to count themselves as pawns. Even the cleverest, the most brilliant, the most beautiful of us—that is all we are. Sometimes our beauty or the charm of our subtle wit may win the outer senses of the rulers of the world; they may admire us physically or mentally, or both, but even at the best, it is only the man that we enslave. The man goes to sleep for a night, he dreams perhaps of our beauty and the delight of our society, but in the morning it is the statesman that wakes, and he looks back on the little weakness of the night before, and thinks of us as an ordinary man might think of the one extra liqueur which he ought not to have taken after a good dinner.

"And now these English—these people into whose hands Fate has given my heritage! Ah, cruel Fate; why did you not make them hateful, vulgar, common—something that I could hate and tread under foot—something that I could think as far beneath me as the bourgeois canaille of Republican France? But you have made them aristocratic! Lord Orrel's lineage goes back past the days of St Louis. His ancestors fought side by side with mine in the first Crusade. True, they have mixed their blood with that American froth, the skimming of the pot-bouillé of the nations, but still, after all, the old blood tells.

"Lady Olive—how I wish that she were either vulgar or ugly, so that I could hate her!—is a daughter of the Plantagenets fit to mate with a Prince of Bourbon, if there were one worthy of her.

Lord Orrel might have been one of those who went with the Eighth Henry to meet Francis on the Field of the Cloth of Gold, patrician in every turn of voice and manner and movement. And Shafto Hardress, who will be Earl of Orrel some day, and master of the world: yes, he is a patrician too; but with him there is something a little different—the American blood perhaps — keen, quick, alert, one moment indolently smoking his cigar and sipping his coffee, the next on his feet, ready to assume the destinies of nations. A man, too, strong and kindly—a man who would risk his life to save a drowning dog, and yet strike down an enemy in his path, so that he might rise a foot or so on the ladder of fame or power. But he is more than that, he wants far more than the empty fame of applause. The fame he wants is that which comes from acknowledged power. You can see the dreamer in his eyes and on his forehead, and you can see the doer on that beautiful, pitiless mouth of his and the square, strong jaw which is under it.

"What a man to love and to be loved by! What would he think, I wonder, if he could read what I am writing here! And yet, are not all things possible? Is it not the unexpected that comes to pass? Why not? Behold, I am left desolate, the garden that I called my heart is a wilderness—a wilderness ploughed up by the ploughshare of sorrow and bitterness, and so it lies fallow. Would it be possible for him to sow the seed for which it is waiting?—and then the harvest would be the empire of the world shared between us! Well, after all, I am not only Adelaide de Condé, daughter

of a lost dynasty. I am a woman, with all the passions and ambitions of our race burning hot within me. If I cannot sit on the throne of the Bourbons, why should I not be empress-consort on the throne of a world-wide empire?—why not? It would be a magnificent destiny!"

When she had written this she laid her pen down, put her elbows on the table, and, with her chin between her hands, looked up in silence for some minutes at the moon sailing through rank after rank of fleecy clouds. Then she took up her pen again, and wrote:

"I wonder if there is another woman?"

She looked at the last words for a moment or two, then put down her pen, closed the book and locked it, and, as she put it away into a drawer of her writing-table, she murmured:

"Ah, well, if there is—if there is——" She caught a sight of herself in the long glass of one of the wardrobes, and she saw a tall, exquisitely-shaped figure of a beautiful woman clad in the plainest of mourning. She looked at herself with eyes of unsparing criticism, and found no fault, and she turned away from the glass, saying:

"Ah, well, if there is—we shall see—and, if there really is, I wonder what she's like."

CHAPTER X

WITHIN a week after the funeral Adelaide and Madame de Condé returned to the late prince's hotel on the Ringstrasse in Vienna. They had taken most cordial leave of Lord Orrel and his son and daughter, and, in spite of all their prejudices of race and nation, Adelaide de Condé had brought something more away with her than the memory of a great sorrow tempered by the kindness of those whom a strange freak of fortune had made friends as well as enemies.

Even the two or three days that she had spent in his society had sufficed to show her that Shafto Hardress possessed in an infinitely greater degree those qualities which go to make the rulers of humanity than her big handsome Alsatian, whose utmost ambition was the command of an army corps. He had the hard, keen, unemotional common-sense which enabled him to see even the tremendous possibilities of Emil Fargeau's discovery in a purely practical and even commercial light, but at the same time he possessed sufficient imagination to enable him to see how far-reaching the moral and social effects of the working-out of the scheme would be on the peoples of the world.

She had herself said nothing of what had passed during that terrible night. For all they knew, the prince had taken the secret with him to the grave.

Once Lord Orrel had very delicately led the conversation up as near to the edge of this supremely important subject as his instincts would let him go, but he had learnt nothing, and an hour or so later he said to his son:

"My dear Shafto, it is perfectly certain that my dear old friend the prince died without giving her any inkling of the great secret which he took to the grave with him."

"Either that, dad," he replied, "or she is the most perfect diplomatist in Europe. I think I have heard you say that the first essential of diplomacy is the ability to assume a perfect counterfeit of innocence and ignorance—in other words, to convey the impression that you know nothing when you know everything."

"Well, if that is so in this case," replied his father, "the mask which mam'selle wears is as impenetrable as it is beautiful. Really, Shafto, I think that rumour did not exaggerate when it called her the most beautiful woman in Europe."

"Yes," said Hardress, slowly; "she certainly is very lovely, and, from the little I've seen of her, she seems as gifted as she is beautiful."

"Then, my dear boy, if you really think that," said Lord Orrel, "how would it be if you were to repair this involuntary injustice which the Fates have wrought upon her? The most beautiful woman in Europe, and perhaps the most nobly born, and you one of the masters of the world! Why not? There is the realisation of a dream even greater than the prince's; and if I have any skill in reading a woman's face or woman's eyes, it is a dream not very difficult for you to realise."

Hardress laughed, and shook his head, and said:

"No, dad; I'm afraid that's not difficult. It's impossible."

The earl looked up sharply, and said:

"Oh, then, of course, there is someone else in the case; and that can hardly be anyone but——"

"You're quite right, dad; it's Chrysie Vandel. I meant to tell you before, but such a lot of things have happened since I got here, and I didn't really think it was of very much consequence for the present—because, after all, she's only accepted me conditionally—but, lovely and all as the marquise is, I think I would rather rule over the Orrel estates with Chrysie than over the world with her."

"Then that, of course, settles it," said the earl, with a certain note of displeasure in his voice. "Miss Vandel is a most charming and fascinating girl, but you will perhaps pardon me, Shafto, if I say that she no more compares with the daughter of the royal line of France than——"

"You needn't go on, dad," said Hardress, interrupting him with a laugh; "comparisons are always more or less unpleasant; and then, you see, you're not in love with either of them, and I'm pretty badly in love with one."

"Well, well," said his father, "of course, if that's the case, there's an end of it, and there's nothing more to be said. Still, for more reasons than one, I must say that I wish you had met the marquise first. The Plantagenets and the Bourbons would have made a splendid stock."

On the same day that this conversation took place in the gardens of the Hôtel Wilhelmshof in Elsenau,

a very different one was taking place in the prince's hotel at Vienna between Adelaide de Condé and Victor Fargeau, who, on receipt of the news of the prince's death, had obtained a few days' leave, and travelled post-haste from Petersburg to Vienna.

It was after dinner, and Madame de Condé had retired to her own room with a slight attack of nerves. The marquise and Victor Fargeau were sitting on either side of the open fireplace, with a little table, holding coffee and liqueurs, between them. Adelaide had accepted a cigarette from his case, and he had lit one too. For several minutes after her aunt had left the room she puffed daintily at her cigarette, and looked across at him with intricately-mingled feelings. At length Victor broke the silence by saying, with a note of impatience in his tone:

"And now, Mam'selle la Marquise, or, if you like it better, my most beautiful Adelaide, I have possessed my soul in patience for nearly two hours. When are you going to tell me this wonderful news of yours?"

"Wonderful, my dear Victor? Alas, it is not only that; it is most sorrowful as well." Then, bracing herself with a visible effort, she threw her half-smoked cigarette into the fireplace, and, gripping the arms of the big chair in which she was sitting, she went on, staring straight into his eyes: "It is nothing less than the story of how your father met his end, and what became of his great secret."

"Nom de Dieu!" he cried, springing to his feet; "you know that, and from whom?"

"From these English and Americans—or Anglo-

Americans, as I suppose I ought to call them," she replied; the people to whom the Fates gave the secret with your father's dead and mutilated body; the people who buried him — the man who might have been the saviour of France—in a nameless English grave."

She kept her voice as steady as she could while she was saying this; she even tried to speak coldly and pitilessly, for she had made up her mind that the reasons of state for her betrothal to this man no longer existed. She had an even higher stake to play for now, and, in spite of all her pride of blood and racial prejudice, this would not be a sacrifice; on the contrary, it would be rather a victory—and so she hardened her voice, as she had done her heart.

"Dead! mutilated!" he exclaimed again. "Yes; I knew he was dead, for he told me in his letter from Paris that he would not, and could not, survive the failure of all his hopes. There were reasons why he should not, but they are of no consequence now. He staked everything, and lost everything, and that is enough. It is not for me to be his judge, now that he has gone to the presence of the highest Judge of all."

"That was said like a good son and a true man, Victor," replied the marquise, with a swift glance of something like admiration at his flushed and handsome face. "But there is something more serious than even the death of one whom you have loved and I have most deeply respected. I heard enough from my own father, during the night he died, to convince me that these people have not only got the secret, but that they are already devoting millions to convert your father's theory into a terrible reality.

"This Viscount Branston, Lord Orrel's son, has already been across to America, and has leased the land about the Magnetic Pole from the Canadian Government. A syndicate has been formed, and even at this very moment the preliminaries of the work are being pushed forward as rapidly as possible. Within a few months they will have begun the storage station itself, and then nothing can save the world from the irresistible power which will be theirs."

While she was speaking, Victor was striding up and down the dining-room, his hands clasped behind his back, and his frowning eyes bent on the thick carpet. Suddenly he stopped and faced her, and said, in sharp, almost passionate accents:

"Perhaps it is not too late after all. My father left me those papers in duplicate. I am weary—sick to death of playing this double game. In a few months war between France and Germany will be inevitable. Russia will side with us, and the prize of the victors will be—for France, the restoration of the Lost Provinces, and a good fat slice of China, and for Russia the whole of Northern China and Korea. Germany hasn't a friend on earth. The English hate her because she is beating them in trade rivalry; Austria has no more forgotten Sadowa than we have forgotten Sedan. Italy is crippled for lack of money, and so is Spain. The rest don't matter; and England and America will be only too glad to stand aside and see Europe tear itself to pieces. So France and Russia will win, and we shall crush our conqueror into the dust."

"But how can that be?" she interrupted, "if your

father's calculations were correct—as these people have evidently found them to be—for if they had not done so they would not have risked their millions on them. From what you and he have told me of his discovery, once these works are set in operation round the Magnetic Pole, fighting will be impossible, save with the permission of those who own them. Metals, as he proved in his last experiment, will become brittle as glass, cannons and rifles will burst at the first shot, even swords and bayonets will be no more use than icicles; steam-engines will cease to work, and the world will go back to the age of wood and stone.

"Picture to yourself, my dear Victor, the armed millions of Europe facing each other, unable to fire a shot, or even to make a bayonet charge. Fancy the fleets of Russia and France and Germany laid up like so many worn-out hulks. No, no, my friend; there can be no talk of serious war while these people possess the power of preventing it at their will."

"But war there must and shall be!" he exclaimed. "I have not been a traitor to my country even in appearance, I have not worn this German uniform —this livery of slavery—for nothing. I have not wormed my way into the confidence of my superiors, I have not risked something worse than death to discover the details of Germany's next campaign against France, to have all my work brought to nothing at the eleventh hour by these English-Americans. No, there may be time even yet; I have risked much, and I will risk more; and you, Adelaide, will you help me? Will you keep the compact which your father made with mine?"

She had been growing paler all the time he had been speaking, knowing instinctively what was coming. She rose slowly from her chair, and said, almost falteringly:

"What do you mean, Victor? How can I help you, when these people already have the secret in their hands, and have been spending their millions for weeks? What can we do against them?"

"We can do this," he replied, stopping again in his walk; "my father pledged his honour as well as everything else he had in the world to insure the success of this scheme. I, his son, can do no less; I will pledge mine in the same cause. I am on leave, and I can wear plain clothes. To-morrow I will start for Paris and see if I cannot bring that pig-headed Minister of War to something like reason. I think I have a suggestion which he will find worth working out, and certainly he will be interested in other things that I shall put before him. Germany I have done with. I have worn the livery of shame too long. Henceforth I am what I was born—a Frenchman. I will resign my commission to-morrow, even if France lets me starve for it. I can easily do that, for the son of a disgraced man cannot remain in the German army, and my poor father disgraced himself to make France the mistress of the world. A miserable Jew in Strassburg holds the honour of our family in his hand. I have no money to redeem it, and so it must go."

She had almost said, "Victor, I am rich; let me redeem it," when she remembered that she was no longer more loyal to him than he was to Germany. All the while that he had been talking she had been

thinking, almost against her will, of Shafto Hardress, and comparing him only too favourably with this man, who, however honourable his motives might seem to himself, was still a traitor and a spy. Instead of this, she said, rising and holding out her hand, "Well, Victor, so far as I can help you I will. We are going to Paris ourselves in a few days, and, by the way, that reminds me I had a letter from Sophie Valdemar only this morning, telling me that she and the count are going there too."

"Ah yes," replied Victor; "a mixture of diplomacy and pleasure, I've no doubt. I wonder what the fair Sophie would give to know what you and I know, Adelaide?"

"A good deal, no doubt," smiled Adelaide, as they shook hands. "Of one thing I'm quite certain; if Russia had the knowledge that you are going to give to France, Russia would find some means of making those storage works an impossibility."

"And that is exactly what I propose to persuade France to do, if possible; but we can talk that over better when we meet in Paris. And now, my Adelaide, good-night."

He clasped her hand and drew her towards him; for the fraction of a second she drew back, and then she yielded and submitted to his kiss; but when the door had closed behind him, she drew the palm of her hand across her lips with a gesture almost of disgust, and said:

"No, my Victor; that must be the last. You cannot afford a Princess of Bourbon now. I sold myself for statecraft which is craft no longer; and, besides, there is another now. Ah, well, I wonder

what will happen in Paris? And Sophie Valdemar, too, and the count! Altogether, I think we shall make quite an interesting little party when we meet in la Ville Lumière."

CHAPTER XI

TEN days had passed since Victor Fargeau's conversation with Adelaide de Condé in Vienna. He had adhered to the decision that he had come to so suddenly under the spell of her wonderful eyes.

He had no family ties now. His mother had died several years before. His two sisters had married Frenchmen, and migrated with their husbands into Normandy. The estate in Alsace, which should have been his own patrimony, was lost, and the German Jew, Weinthal, held not only that but the honour of his family, the good name of his dead father, in his hands. So he had decided to cut himself adrift from his native land until it had become once more a part of France.

He had written to Petersburg and resigned his position on the Diplomatic Staff, and he had also written to headquarters resigning his commission, and telling enough of his father's story to show that, since it was impossible for him now, as a man with a tarnished name, to hold his head up amongst his brother officers, there was nothing left for him but retirement into civil life.

A reply had come back, to the effect that the circumstances of his very painful case were under consideration, and that he need not report himself for duty until the general of the division to which he was attached had given his decision.

He knew that this was equivalent to an acceptance of his resignation. Even though he had asked for it, his dismissal galled him. He knew perfectly well that he had only entered the German army for the purposes of revenge, that in honest language he could only be described as a traitor and a spy—a man who had deliberately abused his position and the confidence of his superiors to get possession of plans of fortresses, details of manœuvres, lines of communication, available rolling-stock, and points of entry which had been selected for possible invasion.

He had, in fact, done more than even Dreyfus was ever accused of, and now, since everything else was lost, he was determined to take the last step. He would throw off his enforced allegiance to Germany; he would take the wreck of his fortunes with him to France, and he would offer her his services and his information. He knew well enough that they would not be rejected, as his father's priceless discovery had been. What he possessed would be bought eagerly by any of the chancelleries of Europe. The French Ministry of War would not refuse his services as it had refused his father's.

Even now some means might be found to checkmate these English-Americans. Already a scheme, daring and yet practicable, was shaping itself in his mind, and if that succeeded he might still achieve the one desire of his life and call Adelaide de Condé his own. For the present, although she had said nothing at that last interview, he felt that a change had come into their relationship. Her words had been more formal and more measured, and her last

kiss colder than before. He felt that he was on his trial; that if he did not achieve something great she was lost to him.

And then there was the other — this English-American—who had not only got the Great Secret, but the millions to put it into practice. He knew her high ambitions. He knew that if she had to choose between love for a man, and the fulfilment of a great project, the man would have but little chance. But he had loved her since he knew the meaning of the word, and he had resolved to risk everything that was left to him to win back what had once been within his grasp. If in the end he failed and the other man won—well, so much the worse for the other man.

And then there was Sophie Valdemar. Even if this English-American did take Adelaide from him—— But that was another matter, the fragment of a possible destiny which still lay upon the knees of the gods. If the worst came to the worst, what would Russia not give to know all that he knew and all that was contained in the only legacy that his father had left him.

So thinking, he travelled to Paris, leaving his uniform behind him, and dressed just as an ordinary man about town, quietly, but with exquisite care and neatness.

As soon as he had settled himself in a modest hotel in one of the streets of the Avenue de l'Opé, he wrote a discreetly-worded note to one of the secretaries of the Ministry of War, a former schoolfellow of his, with whom he had had previous communications of a confidential sort, asking him to arrange a private interview for him with the Minister

at the earliest possible date, and, if possible, to dine with him the next evening. The next morning he called to pay his respects to Madame de Bourbon and the marquise at the hotel they had taken in the Avenue Neuilly.

He met the marquise alone in the salon. She received him quietly and almost coldly—but this he had expected.

"So you have finally decided," she said. "I thought from your letter that you would do so. How very different you look *en civile!* Really, although we naturally hate the sight of them, still, it must be admitted that those German uniforms do make a good-looking man look his best."

"Yes," replied Victor, choking down his chagrin as best he might; "to a certain extent it is true, after all, that the feathers make the bird, and so, of course, the clothes make the man. Still, I'm afraid I shall have to ask you to tolerate me for the future without my German plumage. As you say, I have made my decision. I have broken with Germany for ever. Henceforth, I am a son of France—and, Adelaide, I have come to ask a daughter of France to help me to serve her."

"Of France!" she echoed, drawing herself up, and looking at him with a half-angry glint in her eyes, "of what France? Of this nation of snobs and shopkeepers, ruled by a combination of stockbrokers, heavy-witted bourgeoisie and political adventurers? or the old France—my France—the France of my ancestors, as it was in the days when the great Louis said: 'L'etát c'est moi'? The one is not worth saving; the other might be worth restoring."

"But this France of the bourgeoisie must first be saved, so that we may make out of it the foundation for the throne of the great Louis. If we succeed, Adelaide, as it is still possible that we may do, we shall be strong enough to abolish the salic law and to enthrone you as Empress of the French."

"Of France, if you please! My ancestors were Kings of France. Even the Corsican dared only style himself Emperor of the French. You seem to forget that I am a daughter of the Bourbons, a scion of the older line, and that therefore France is my personal heritage. But come," she went on, with a swift change of tone and manner, "it will be time enough to talk about that when I am nearer to my inheritance than I am now. You said that you wanted my help—how? What can I do now, left alone as I am?"

"Not quite alone, Adelaide," he said, half reproachfully. "Have I not given up everything, even, as some would say, sacrificed honour itself, to help you to win back that which is your own by every right? And you can help me as no one else can. I have a friend in the Ministry of War—Gaston Leraulx, one of the secretaries. We were schoolfellows and college friends. He is to dine with me to-night, and he will arrange an interview with the Minister of War. I shall ask you to come with me to that interview."

"What do you say, Victor? You wish me, a princess of the House of Bourbon, to enter the bureau of one of these ministers—these politicians who are ruling in the place of the old noblesse—men whom we might perhaps have employed as lacqueys?"

"That is true," he replied; "but remember, Adelaide, that time brings its differences. My ancestors were nobles when yours were kings. If the old order of things is to be restored we must use these people as means to an end. I ask you to come with me to the Minister of War, so that you may help me to convince him, from your own knowledge, of the terrible mistake that he made when he refused to entertain the project that my father placed before him.

"You can tell him that strange story of how my father in his despair committed his body and his secret to the sea; how the sea gave it up into the hands of our worst enemies—the enemies of yesterday, to-day, and to-morrow—England and America; and how, even now, they are spending their millions upon that upon which France would not even risk a few paltry thousands.

"When I place my papers before him he will see that they are identical with my father's, and I shall give him others which will make it impossible for him to doubt my faith; and you, you will be there to help me with your knowledge, with the prestige of your name, and with your beauty. The General may be all that you think him, but do not forget that he is a Frenchman, and that all Frenchmen who are not quite mad respect and admire at least two things——"

"And those are—what?" she said, taking a couple of steps towards him, and speaking in a low, earnest tone. "Am I to understand you to mean that this man—I know that he is one of the most able men that France can boast of—might perhaps be made an instrument of?"

"I mean," said Victor, taking her hand unresistingly, "that General Ducros is himself an aristocrat, a man whose forefathers served yours well; that he is a Frenchman whose spirit will recognise yours as being of similar lineage, whose eyes will not be blind, and whose ears will not be deaf. Surely, Adelaide, you see by this time what I mean: you see how, with you, I may succeed in everything, and, without you, I may fail. And, remember, if I fail there is an end of everything. This is our last hope. If it is not realised, these accursed English and Americans will be masters of the situation, masters of the world, indeed. Surely, Adelaide, for the sake of all that is past and all that may be to come you will not say no?"

"No, Victor; I will not," she replied, still allowing her hand to rest in his, and yet thinking the while of that other man, whose face was ever present to her eyes, and whose voice was ever echoing in her ears. "I will visit this Minister of yours with you. His name is good, and perhaps he may not be unworthy of it. At any rate, he is not disgraced by one of those new titles of the First or Second Empire. If I can help you I will; trust me for that. When it is arranged send me a telegram and our carriage is at your disposal. Ah, who is this?"

At this moment the door opened, and the lacquey announced:

"Monsieur le Comte de Valdemar; Ma'm'selle la Comtesse de Valdemar."

Victor Fargeau saw at a glance that the count and Sophie were dressed in half-mourning, and instantly divined that their visit was one of con-

dolence. This, of course, gave him a most excellent excuse to make his adieux.

There was just a glimmer of taunting mockery in Sophie's brilliant eyes as she recognised the dashing young cavalry officer in the sober garb of civil life, but it passed like a flash, and as they shook hands she said:

"A most unexpected meeting, captain!" And then, with a look of frank challenge, "No doubt it is most important business that has brought you to Paris *en civile*."

"It is not without importance, countess, at least to my own poor and presently insignificant self. Whether," he went on, with a swift involuntary glance at Adelaide, who was receiving the condolences of the count, "it will ever be of importance to others is one of the secrets of fate; and, if so, you, who are no doubt justly credited with knowing half the secrets of Europe, will probably be one of the first to discover the fact."

"I wonder whether that is intended for a compliment or the reverse," said Sophie, with a look of challenge coming back into her eyes. "You see, captain, there are two sorts of people who are supposed to know everything—diplomatists and spies."

Her voice dropped almost to a whisper as she spoke the last word.

Victor did his best to preserve his composure, but Sophie's watchful eyes saw that the shot had gone home; still, the next moment he replied, with the stiff wooden-doll bow of the German officer, and without a tremor in his voice:

"It would be quite impossible that mam'selle could be anything but one of the two."

As he raised his head she looked into his eyes again, and laughed outright.

"Well hit, captain! that was very nicely put. I think you and I would make better friends than enemies, and in proof of my belief, let me tell you a secret which is not of Europe. An Anglo-American syndicate has for some reason or other leased several square miles round the Magnetic Pole in Boothia Land, British North America."

"Really! And might I ask why? It doesn't seem to be a very profitable investment in landed property."

"Who knows?" said Sophie, with a little shrug of her shapely shoulders. "These English and Americans, you know, are always doing the maddest things. I shouldn't wonder if they intended to turn the *Aurora borealis* into electric light for Chicago."

"Nor I," said Victor. "And now, if you will permit me, I must say Au revoir."

"I wonder how much our ex-captain really knows, and if my dear friend Adelaide here knows anything or not," said Sophie, in her soul, when Victor had made his adieux and the door closed behind him.

CHAPTER XII

IT was not until four days later that Victor's friend in the Ministry of War was able to procure an appointment for him with General Ducros. Pressure of business was Captain Gaston Leraulx' explanation, and it was an honest one. What he did not know was that on the evening of the day when Count Valdemar and his daughter paid their visit of condolence to Adelaide de Condé, General Ducros dined with them.

They had no other guest, for the best of reasons. Countess Sophie, the omniscient, by means of a happy accident, had got a fairly clear idea of the outlines of the Great Storage Scheme. The servants of the White Tzar are everywhere, known or unknown, generally the latter. A Russian trapper happened to meet a French-Canadian voyageur in Montreal when Shafto Hardress was making his negotiations with the Canadian Government. They had a few drinks and a talk over the extraordinary deal that he had made with the Canadian Government, a deal which had been reported and commented on by the Canadian and American journals with the usual luxuriance of speculative imagination. The same night the voyageur and the trapper, both men who were living on the products of their season's hunting and trapping, cabled practically the same details to Paris and Petersburg.

The voyageur's telegram had gone to General Ducros; and he, with the instinct of a soldier and a statesman, had instantly connected it with the greatest mistake that he had made in his life, his refusal to entertain the proposal which Doctor Emil Fargeau had laid before him. He saw that he had refused even to examine a scheme which this Anglo-American syndicate had somehow got hold of and thought it worth their while to spend thousands of pounds even in preliminary development. As he said to himself when the unwelcome news came to him, "I have committed a crime—for I have made a mistake, and for statesmen mistakes are something worse than crimes."

As soon as the Russian trapper's message had reached Count Valdemar, he immediately discussed it with his daughter, who over and over again had given proof of an almost clairvoyant insight into the most difficult and intricate concerns of international diplomacy. The moment she saw it her instinct led her back to the reception at the German Embassy in Petersburg.

"It was all very easy, after all, general," she said, when the dinner was over, and the coffee and liqueurs were on the table. "If you will pardon me saying so, it is in cases like this that the intuition of the woman outstrips the logical faculty of the man. You have asked me how I discovered the connection between the interview between yourself and Doctor Fargeau, which, as you say, ended somewhat unhappily for France, and this extraordinary purchase of a seemingly worthless landed property by Viscount Hardress."

"Ah yes," said the general, knocking the ash off his cigarette. "Statesmen are not supposed to make mistakes, but to you, Ma'm'selle, and Monsieur le Comte, I must confess, to my most intense chagrin, the man was an Alsatian, and had accepted the new order of things in the provinces, he was a German subject, and his son was a German officer on the general staff. What could I think?"

"My dear general," replied Sophie, after a long whiff at her yellow Russian cigarette, "your conclusions were perfectly just under the circumstances. But when you have had your interview with Captain Fargeau and my dear friend the marquise, I think you will find that, after all, they were erroneous. Do you not think so, papa?"

"I fancy," replied the count, slowly, "that when you have made your explanations to the general, he will agree with you."

"Very well, then, general, I will spin my little thread before you, and you shall see whether it holds together or not. First, there was that snatch of a conversation that I heard at the German Embassy reception in Petersburg. Captain Fargeau was talking with the late Prince de Condé, and he was called away by one of the servants. From another source I knew afterwards that he had received a telegram from Strassburg. He came back, and made a pretence of dancing with my very dear friend, Adelaide de Condé. They went out into the winter garden, just in front of myself and my partner. I heard him tell her that 'he' had succeeded, and gone to Paris.

"You have told me of his father's visit to you. The chief part of his scheme was the building of

these works round the Magnetic Pole in Boothia Land. The prince and Adelaide go to a little out-of-the-way place in Germany, called Elsenau. The fashionable papers told us that. They also told us that Lord Orrel and his daughter were there; and almost the same day arrives this Viscount Branston, Lord Orrel's son. The prince suddenly and mysteriously dies—as they say, from the bursting of a blood-vessel on the brain. Of course, all the papers tell us of that, and also that Viscount Branston goes to Vienna and brings back Madame de Bourbon, who is here now, in Paris, with Adelaide.

"Before this, you and my father have the telegrams from our good friends out yonder in Canada. Then the Canadian and American papers confirm this, and tell us that this same Viscount Branston has leased this very spot of seemingly worthless land, which was, as you tell us, essential to the carrying out of Emil Fargeau's scheme, and that a great Anglo-American syndicate has been formed to build an observatory there, or a central station for the control of wireless telegraphy throughout the world; and so on. No doubt the newspaper stories are as familiar to you as they are to us. Now, general, do you see the connection between that scrap of conversation I heard in Petersburg, and the purchase of that patch of snow-covered rock in Boothia Land?"

"Ma'm'selle," replied the general, "it is not a thread, but a chain, and there is not a weak link in it. It is perfectly plain now that there is a connection between this German officer, at present on leave in Paris, and these English and Americans who have somehow become possessed of the details of the

scheme which I so unfortunately rejected. Still, until we have heard what Captain Fargeau and your friend the Marquise de Montpensier, whom I am to have the honour of receiving to-morrow, have to say, it would not, I think, be wise to conclude that they have entered into a conspiracy with those whom I may describe as our common enemies."

"That, general, I do not believe for a moment," said the count. "All their interests lie the other way. They have as much reason to dislike England and America as we have; and, until I know to the contrary, I shall prefer to believe that the Marquise de Montpensier, a daughter of the Bourbons, is a friend to France, and therefore, through France, to Russia."

"And I believe that too," said Sophie. "As far as England and America are concerned, the interests of France and Russia are identical. If these arrogant Anglo-Saxons are ever to be put into their proper place, Russia and France must do it: and, to begin with, by some means or other, this scheme must be frustrated. And now, general, I have given you a little information to-night, and I am going to ask a little favour in return."

"It shall be granted, if possible. Ma'm'selle has only to ask it."

"There is, I believe," said Sophie, putting her arms on the table, "a little apartment leading out of your own bureau at the Ministry of War?"

General Ducros could not help raising his eyelids a little, for he knew that neither Sophie nor her father had ever been in that room, but he dropped them again instantly, and said:

"That is perfectly true, ma'm'selle; it is a little apartment, devoted to my own private use. In fact, to tell you the truth, I am sometimes there when it is convenient for my secretary to prove by ocular demonstration to some more or less important personage that I am not at home, and that, in consequence of my unavoidable absence, an undesirable interview has to be postponed."

"Exactly," laughed Sophie. "Such things are not unknown elsewhere; and I am going to ask you, general, for the use of that room during your interview to-morrow with the Marquise de Montpensier and Captain Fargeau. In other words, I wish to be present at the interview without doing anything to interrupt the smooth course of the proceedings."

"Ma'm'selle knows so much already that there is no reason why she should not know more," replied the general, not very cordially; "but, of course, it is understood, as a matter of honour between ourselves, that in this matter we are allies, as our countries are."

"Undoubtedly," replied the count. "It would, indeed, be mutually impossible for it to be otherwise."

"Then," said Sophie, "we will consider that a bargain. My father and I will call shortly before the captain and Adelaide reach the Ministry, and afterwards——"

"And afterwards, my dear general, if you will allow me to interrupt you," said the count, "I would suggest that we should have a little dinner here, to which Sophie will invite Madame de Bourbon and the marquise, as well as Captain Fargeau; a dinner

which, if you will permit me to say so, may possibly be of historic interest; an occasion upon which, perhaps, the alliance between France and Russia will be cemented by a mutual agreement and arrangement to outwit these English-Americans, and secure the world-empire for France and Russia."

General Ducros assented. He saw that, owing to the fatal mistake he had made when he rejected Emil Fargeau's scheme, he was now, thanks to the subtle intellect of Sophie Valdemar, forced to share the possibility of obtaining that world-empire with Russia, the ally whose friendship had already cost France so dearly, an ally to whom France had paid millions for a few empty assurances and one or two brilliant scenes in the international spectacular drama. No one knew better than he did how worthless this alliance really was to France, and that night he reproached himself bitterly for letting slip the chance of making France independent of her blood-sucking ally. Still, by an extraordinary combination of chance and skill, Sophie Valdemar had got the necessary knowledge of the great secret, and, perforce, he had to share it with her and Russia.

Punctually at eleven o'clock the next morning Adelaide de Condé and Victor Fargeau were admitted to the bureau of the Minister of War. The interview was very different from the one that he had granted to the man whom his scepticism had practically driven to his death, and so placed the great secret in the hands of his country's enemies. It was also much shorter. When, at the outset, the general had addressed Victor as Captain Fargeau, he replied:

"Pardon, general, I am captain no longer, nor am

I any longer a German. I have resigned. Henceforth I am a Frenchman in fact, as I have always been in heart. You would not believe that of my father, but I will prove it to you of myself."

"My dear sir," replied the general, "no one could be more delighted to hear such news as that than I; and I can promise you that, in that case, an appointment—not, of course, an acknowledged one, since you are not now legally a Frenchman — shall be placed at your disposal."

Adelaide turned her head away as he spoke, and her lips curled into a smile which made her look almost ugly. "So now he is to become a paid spy," she thought. "And he still considers that I am pledged to him. But what can I do till we have either succeeded or failed? Ah, if it were only the other one! If he were a Frenchman, or if only I could make him love me as I could—well, we shall see. After all, patriotism has its limits. France has broken its allegiance to my house. What do I owe it?"

General Ducros saw at a glance that the specifications which Victor handed to him were the duplicates of those which he had so unwisely and so unfortunately for himself and for France refused to accept from his father. If anything had been needed to convince him of the terrible error that he had made, Adelaide's story of the last night of her father's life would have done it.

"Monsieur," he said, laying his hand upon the papers, "I will confess that I have made a great mistake, even that I have committed a crime against France and your father. Alas, as we know now from the story that Ma'm'selle la Marquise has told us,

he is dead; and it is I who, innocently and unknowingly, sent him to his death. I can do no more than admit my error, and promise you that every force at my command shall be used to repair it, if possible. These other documents, which you have been good enough to hand to me, I take, of course, as an earnest of your good faith and your devotion to France."

"I wonder what they are," said Sophie Valdemar, in her soul, as the Minister's words reached her ear through the closed door of the little private room. "An Alsatian, a German officer, Military Attaché at Petersburg, he resigns his commission, goes back to his French allegiance, and gives the general something which proves his good faith! Ah, perhaps a scheme of campaign—sketches of routes—details of mobilisation—plans of fortresses! We must fight Germany soon. I wonder whether I could persuade the good general to let me have a look at them, if they are anything of that sort."

While these thoughts were flashing through Sophie's mind, the general was saying:

"And now, monsieur, you mentioned a short time ago that you had a scheme for repairing the error which I have confessed. May I ask for an outline of it? I need hardly say that, if it is only feasible, France will spare neither money nor men to accomplish the object, and to regain what I have so deplorably lost."

"My scheme, general," said Victor, "is exceedingly simple. These English-Americans are going to erect storage works round the Magnetic Pole, which, as of course you know, is situated in the far

north, in a sort of No-man's Land, untrodden by human feet once in half-a-century. Let France fit out an Arctic expedition of two ships. Let them be old warships—as the *Alert* and *Discovery* were in the English expedition. Their mission will, of course, be a peaceful one, and their departure will cause no comment save in the scientific papers, but in their holds the ships will carry the most powerful guns they can mount, ammunition, and——"

"Excellent!" interrupted the general, rising from his seat. "My dear monsieur, I congratulate you upon a brilliant idea. Yes, the expedition shall be prepared with all speed; the newspapers shall describe the ships as old ones, but the Minister of Marine and myself will arrange that they shall carry the best guns and the most powerful explosives that we have. They shall be manned by picked crews, commanded by our best officers; they shall sail for the North Pole, or thereabouts, as all these expeditions do, and they shall make a friendly call at Boothia Land. It will not be possible now before next summer because of the ice; but the same cause will delay our friends in building the storage works; and when our ships call and the works are well in progress—well, then, we will see whether or not our friends will yield to logic; and, if not, to force majeure. Is that your idea?"

"Exactly," replied Victor. "We will wait till the works are finished, say this time next year, or two years or three years, it matters nothing, and then we will take them. The expedition will carry men trained to do the work under my orders. I have the whole working of the apparatus in those

papers. Once we possess the works we are masters of the world, because we shall be possessors of its very life. But before that there may be war—the nations of Europe fighting for the limbs of the Yellow Giant in the East. Germany, as you will see from those papers, is nearly ready. It is only a matter of a few months, and then she will make her first rush on France. England and America can be rendered helpless if we once seize the works, and Russia can, I presume, be trusted?"

"Without doubt," said the general. "Russia is our true and faithful ally."

"Yes," said Sophie again, in her soul; "provided she has a share in that Polar expedition, as she shall have."

CHAPTER XIII

NEARLY a year had passed since General Ducros had dined with Count Valdemar and Ma'm'selle Sophie in Paris. It was Cowes week, and there was quite a cosmopolitan party at Orrel Court. Adelaide de Condè and Madame de Bourbon were the best of friends with Count Valdemar and Sophie. Clifford Vandel and Miss Chrysie were good friends with everybody, the latter especially good friends with Hardress, whose work was now rapidly approaching completion. In short, it was as charming a cosmopolitan party as you could have found on the Hampshire shore, or anywhere else; and none of the other guests of Lord Orrel, and there were several of them not unskilled in diplomacy, ever dreamt that under the surface of the smooth-flowing conversation, whether round the dinner-table at the Court, on the *Nadine*, which ran down the Southampton Water every day that there was a good race on, or at Clifford Vandel's bungalow at Cowes, whose smoothly shaven lawn sloped down almost to the water's edge, lay undercurrents of plot and counterplot, the issue of which was the question whether the dominion of the world was to be committed to Anglo-Saxon or Franco-Slav hands.

One night—it was the evening after the great regatta—three conversations took place under the roof of Orrel Court, which the greatest newspapers

of the two hemispheres would have given any amount of money to be able to report, since each of them was possibly pregnant with the fate of the world.

When Clifford Vandel came up from the smoking-room a little after eleven he found Miss Chrysie waiting for him in the sitting-room of the suite of apartments that had been given to them in the eastern wing of the old mansion.

"Don't you think you ought to be in bed, Chrysie, instead of sitting there smoking a cigarette, and—Why, what's the matter with you, girl?"

He had begun with something like a note of reproach in his voice, but the last words were spoken in a tone of tender concern.

She got up from her chair, went to the door, and shut it and locked it, and then, with her half-smoked cigarette poised between her fingers, her face pale, and her eyes aflame, she faced him and said, in low, quick-flowing tones:

"Poppa, can't you see what's the matter?—you, who can see things months before they happen, and make millions by gambling on them?—you who did up Morgan himself over that wireless telegraphy combine—can't you see what's going on right here just under your nose?"

"My dear Chrysie, what are you talking about? I've not noticed anything particular happening, except what's happened in the right way. What's the trouble?"

"The trouble's that Frenchwoman—that second edition of Marie Antoinette. Can't you see what she's doing every hour and day of her life? Can't you see that she's as beautiful as an angel, and—

well, as clever as the other thing, and that she's just playing her hand for all she's worth to get the man I want—the man I half-promised myself to a year ago!"

"Perhaps I've been too busy about other matters, and perhaps I never expected anything of the sort," replied her father; "and anyhow, men are fools at seeing this kind of thing; but if that's so, and you really do want him, why not promise yourself altogether and fix things up? There's no man I'd sooner have for a son-in-law; and if you want him, and he wants you, why——"

"It's just there, poppa, that I'm feeling bad about it," she said, coming nearer to him, and speaking with a little break in her voice. "I'm not so sure that he does want me now—at least, not quite as badly as he did that time when he asked me first in Buffalo. Don't you see that Frenchwoman's bewitched him? And who could blame him, after all? What do all the society papers say about her? The most beautiful woman in Europe—the great-great-grand-daughter of Louis the Magnificent himself, with the noblest blood of France in her veins! How could any man with eyes in his head and blood in his heart resist her? Why, I could no more compare with her than——"

"Than a wild rose in one of these beautiful English lanes could compare with a special variety of an orchid in a hothouse; and I guess, Chrysie, that if I haven't made a great mistake about Shafto Hardress—if he does get a bit intoxicated with the scent of the orchid, if it comes to winning and wearing the flower, he'll take the wild rose. If he

doesn't—well, I guess you'll do pretty well without him."

"But I just can't do without him, poppa. You are the only one I'd tell it to, but that's so; and before that Frenchwoman gets him I'd have her out and shoot her. Women in her country fight duels. And there's more to it than that," she went on, after a little pause.

"And what might that be, Miss Fire-eater?" said her father, half-laughing, half-seriously.

"I believe that she and that Russian girl, who goes languishing around Shafto when the marquise or myself isn't around, know more than they should do about this storage scheme. I don't say I've been listening—I wouldn't do it—no, not even for them; but sometimes you can't help hearing; and only the day before yesterday, out in the grounds there, I heard both of them, not to each other, but at different times to Count Valdemar, mention the name of Victor Fargeau; and you know who he is—son of the man whose remains Shafto picked up at sea—creator of this great scheme of yours—a Frenchman who was an officer in the German army. Now listen: both these women are friends of General Ducros, the French War Minister. France is sending out the Polar expedition this year that she has been preparing for months—you know that; so has Russia. Do you see what I mean now?"

"I guess you've got me on my own ground there, Chrysie," said her father, laying his hand across her shoulders, and drawing her towards him. "You were dead right when you said that a woman's intuition can sometimes see quicker and farther

than a man's reason; but on that kind of ground I guess I can see as well as anyone. I admit that I have been wondering a bit why just this particular year France and Russia should be sending two Polar expeditions out; but it's pretty well sure that if you hadn't seen that this French marquise and the Russian countess were after the man you want—and the man you're going to get, too, if he's the man I think he is—I shouldn't have seen what I see now."

"And what's that, poppa?"

"They're not Polar expeditions at all, Chrysie; those ships are no more trying to go to the North Pole than they're trying to find the source of the Amazon. You got the key that opens the whole show when you heard them talking about Victor Fargeau. They're going to Boothia Land, that's where they're going to, and they're not going on what the Russians generally call a voyage of scientific discovery. I'd bet every dollar we've got in the Trust that those ships have guns on them, and there's going to, be a fight for that Magnetic Pole after all. Anyhow, there's a cable going across to Doctor Lamson the first thing to-morrow morning. If there's anything like that going on, he can't be on guard any too soon. And now, little girl," he went on, raising his hand and putting it on her head, "you go to bed, and don't you worry about Frenchwomen or Russians. Shafto Hardress comes of good old English and American stock, and he's just as clever as he can be without being altogether American. Don't you worry about him. There's not going to be any trouble in his mind

when he has to choose between a clean-blooded, healthy American girl and anyone else, even if she has got all the blood of all the Bourbons in her veins, or even if she is the daughter of Count Valdemar of Russia, whose ancestors, I guess, were half savages when yours were gentlemen. Don't you worry about that, little girl; you just go to bed, and dream about the time when you'll be sitting on a throne that Marie Antoinette's wasn't a circumstance to. Now, I have told you, and that's so. Good-night. I'll have a talk with Lord Orrel to-morrow morning, and see to the business part of the affair."

As Chrysie crossed the long corridor to her own room she caught a glimpse of a tall, graceful figure which she had come to know only too well, and the sweep of a long, trailing skirt, vanishing through a door which she knew led into Count Valdemar's dressing-room.

"That's Sophie," she said. "I wonder if she saw me. She's been with the marquise, I suppose; and now she's going to have a talk with her father, something like mine with poppa. It's mean to listen, and I couldn't do it if I wanted to, but I'd like to give some of those dollars that poppa's going to make out of this scheme to hear what she's going to say, or what she's been saying to the marquise. I reckon I could make some history out of it if I knew; but anyhow, there's going to be trouble with that Frenchwoman. I don't think so much about the Russian. I believe she wants to marry either Lord Orrel or poppa; she's just about as mean as she is pretty and clever. I'd just like to say that English swear-word about her."

Miss Chrysie said that, and many other things, in her soul that night after she had laid her head on her pillow; and, even after the demands of physical fatigue upon a perfectly healthy physique had compelled slumber, she dreamt of herself as a modern Juno, usurping the throne of Jove, and wielding his lightnings, with the especial object of destroying utterly from the face of the earth two young ladies, with whom she was living on apparent terms of the most perfect friendship, and who were even then resting their pretty heads on pillows just like hers under the same roof.

CHAPTER XIV

SOPHIE opened the door in answer to her father's murmured "entrez," and closed it very gently behind her. She had not noticed Chrysie as she slipped into her own room, for her back was towards her, and, happily, she had no suspicion whatever of the conclusions which Chrysie's love-sharpened eyes had enabled her to reach. If she had, some skilfully-devised accident would probably have happened. For though but two people among the guests at Orrel Court knew it, there were spies both inside and around the great house, unscrupulous agents of an unscrupulous government, who would have carried out their orders at all hazards. In fact, they had been brought there by Count Valdemar, at his daughter's suggestion, to assist in working out the most daring conspiracy that had ever been hatched at an English country house.

"Well, papa," said Sophie, in her soft Russian, as she took a cigarette, and dropped into an easy-chair with a motion that was almost voluptuous in its gracefulness, "now that these good people have gone to bed, we shall be able to have a little quiet talk. Are you still of opinion that the scheme that I sketched out is feasible?"

"Everything is feasible, my dear Sophie," replied her father, "provided only you have people of sufficient genius and boldness to carry it out. No doubt

it would be possible with our own people, and those of the English sailors whom we have been able to bribe, to carry out that brilliant plan of yours, especially as you appear to have wrought such a magical transformation in the allegiance of this impressionable young engineer of yours on the *Nadine*. Are you quite sure of him?"

"Sure of him!" said Sophie, in a voice that was little above a whisper, and leaning forward and looking at her father with a smile which made even him think her beauty almost repulsive for the moment. "Edward Williams is as much in love as Boris Bernovitch was, and is—although he is where he is. I have promised, as usual. He has believed me, as usual, just like any other fool of his sex. Day after day I have met him and talked with him in what he calls my adorable foreign English. I have given him rendezvous which would have startled my Lord Orrel and all his belongings out of that abominable, habitual calm of theirs, and perhaps procured me a request to leave the house immediately. I have fooled him out of his seven senses, and to-night I have performed the supreme sacrifice for Russia, and let him kiss me."

The cruelly smiling lips changed into an expression of contemptuous disgust as she said this, and the count replied, coldly:

"Not a pleasant duty, Sophie; but for Holy Russia her servants must do everything. That, as I have tried to teach you almost as soon as you could speak, is our duty, almost our religion. Our fortune, our lives, our everything must be devoted to the emperor and to Holy Russia—soon now, I hope, to be mistress

of the world. You as a woman, and a beautiful woman, have your weapons; I as a man, and a diplomatist, have mine. It is your duty to use yours with as little scruple as I use mine.

"And so you really think," he went on, after a little pause, "that it will be possible to capture the *Nadine*, with all her noble and gallant company on board, and compel her to join our Russian expedition to Boothia Land. Certainly, it would be a brilliant triumph if we could. We should have all the heads of the great Trust at our mercy—Lord Orrel, his son, and this most objectionably straightforward Clifford Vandel, who, it would appear, has so vastly improved upon the original scheme. Then we should have the womankind too—Lady Olive, Miss Vandel, and the beautiful marquise herself, always a dangerous power that might work against us. By the way, Sophie, has it struck you that the young viscount is wavering in his allegiance to the fair American under the influence of the beautiful daughter of the Condés?"

"As well ask me whether I am a woman, father," she replied, with a low, wicked-sounding laugh. "Have I no eyes in my head? Did not this fair American interfere with my plan for securing the noble Shafto to ourselves by making him fall in love with her before I saw him, and have I not done everything, all the thousand and one little things that a woman can do, to help my dear friend the marquise to the attainment of her very evident desires? In other words, have I forgotten the lessons that you have been teaching me since you began to train me to think myself not a girl with a heart

and a soul, and living blood in her veins, but only a human machine, fair to look upon, animated by a brain which knows no other duty than the service of our Holy Russia? You know that if I had loved this man myself it would have been just the same. I should have done exactly as I have done,—at least, I believe so."

"Ah," laughed the count, softly, "that is the problem, my dear Sophie; and that, I tell you frankly, has always been my fear for you. You are young, brilliant, and beautiful; and I've always been a little afraid that out of some of all your admirers whom your smiles have brought to your feet there might be one whom you might love; and when a woman loves she pities, and pity and diplomacy have as much to do with each other as charity and business. Still, I am not without hopes that some day you will meet some worthy son of Russia; and remember, my Sophie, that, if we succeed in this, if we place the control of the elixir vitæ of the world in the hand of Russia, you might look even near the throne itself."

"And I most certainly should," said Sophie, throwing her head back. "I tell you frankly, papa, I'm not doing all this for nothing. I am not forgetting that I am a woman, with all a woman's natural feelings and inspirations, all her possible loves and hopes and pities, only for the sake of serving even Russia. If I succeed I shall have my reward, and it shall be a splendid one."

"And you will have well deserved it," said the count, looking with something more than fatherly pride on the beautiful daughter who had learnt the

lessons of what he was pleased to call diplomacy so well. "Still, I cannot disguise from myself that this last scheme of yours is, to say the least of it, a desperate one; for it amounts to nothing less than a kidnapping of one of the best-known noblemen and statesmen in England, his son and daughter, one of the wealthiest and best-known American financiers in the world and his daughter; to say nothing of one of the Ministers of the Tsar and his daughter. I need hardly remind you, of course, that the failure of such a venture would never be forgiven in Petersburg. I need not tell you that the Little Father never pardons mistakes, and, besides, my dear Sophie, have you quite satisfied yourself that such a very extreme measure is absolutely necessary?"

"My dear papa," said Sophie, getting up from her chair, and raising her voice ever so little, "in the first place, there will be—there can be no mistake about it; and, in the second place, I assure you that it is absolutely necessary if Russia is to have undisputed control of the Storage Works. You see, the outside world knows absolutely nothing about these works. There have been all sorts of stories circulated about them, but no one who has actually seen them has said or written a word about them. In fact, as far as we know, only two men have been there and come back —Viscount Branston and Mr Vandel; Dr Lamson is there still. How do we know what means of defence they've got? They might be able even now, from what Victor Fargeau and General Ducros told us, to demagnetise our ships, stop our engines from working and our guns from shooting; or, on the other hand, what would be almost as bad, this

Lamson might blow up the works and shatter every plan we've got—perhaps ruin all prospects of the invasion, too, unless we have some means of persuading him not to use his power. What better means could we have than the possession of the heads of the concern?

"I have heard hints, too, that he is not without hopes of winning the fair Lady Olive some day, when he becomes one of the masters of the world. Granted now that it is within our power to do what we please with all of them, or, if you like to put it diplomatically, with the heads of this gigantic conspiracy against the peace and security of the world, and plot to destroy the independence of the nations and the freedom of humanity, for it is nothing else, should we not be justified in using any and every means—yes," she went on, her voice hardening, "even to the very last means of all, to snatch this tremendous power out of the hands of these sordid English and Americans and give it into those of Holy Russia. It is kidnapping, piracy, invasion of friendly territory—everything, I grant you, that is criminal under the law of nations; but remember it is also a struggle for the command of the life-force of the world—which means practically the control of the world itself and all that therein is."

"And," said the count, smiling, "I suppose you would say that, as these people are our natural enemies, with whom we shall very soon be at war—'à la guerre comme à la guerre'—I suppose you mean that when we have got the *Nadine* and her noble company we shall use them as hostages to prevent any accidents happening to our little Polar

expedition. Really, my dear Sophie, your methods have suddenly become almost mediæval; still, if they are only successful, they will be none the less effective for that. Let me see now," he went on, leaning back in his chair and putting the tips of his fingers together, "I wonder if I can find any flaw in the arrangements. You know, it is quite essential, my dear Sophie, that there should not be any."

"My dear papa," she replied, smiling, and leaning her back against the old carved mantelpiece, "try, by all means. If you cannot find one, I don't think there can be much chance of its being anything but practically perfect."

"Very well," said the count, lighting a fresh cigarette. "In two or three days' time, when the regattas are over, the house-party at Orrel Court will break up, and a few days after that, say a week in all, Lord Orrel, with his son and daughter, and the American and his daughter, and Ma'm'selle la Marquise as Lady Olive's guest, are taking a trip across the Atlantic in the *Nadine*, partly in the course of business and partly on pleasure bent; Madame de Bourbon and her maids return to Paris; the *Vlodoya* puts into Southampton the day the *Nadine* sails, to take us on our trip to the Mediterranean. Your good friend the lieutenant has informed you that, although the *Nadine* can make twenty knots on an emergency, she will only take a leisurely summer trip across the Atlantic to Boston, at about twelve or fifteen. He has given you a chart of the course which she will take. He has also promised you that at a certain spot in mid-Atlantic there shall be a little accident to her

engines which enable the *Vlodoya* to overtake her. The *Vlodoya*, commanded and well manned by good servants of the empire, with a couple of three-pounders and a Maxim in case of accident, will overhaul her and give her the alternative of surrender or sinking. That is where the piracy will begin, I suppose."

Sophie nodded, and, laughing, replied in English: "Yes, right there—as our American beauty, as Lord Hardress thinks her, would say. The *Nadine* is unarmed, and, of course, resistance will be useless; in fact, it would simply be the merest folly. His lordship will accept us and a portion of the *Vlodoya's* crew as self-invited guests; we shall then steam away together, not to Boston, but to the rendezvous with our little expedition, and once we join forces—well, the thing is practically done."

"I agree so far," said her father; "still, there are one or two accidents that we have not yet taken into account. Suppose, for instance, one of these detestable British cruisers, which seem to be everywhere, should happen to be there just then; or that even one of the big liners should come in sight at the critical moment. It seems to me that, for the present at least, secrecy is above all things essential, for if the news of—well, such an outrage, did get back to Europe, you know perfectly well that Russia would of necessity disown us, and that we and all on board the *Vlodoya* would simply be treated as common pirates."

"So I suppose," said Sophie, coolly; "but I have provided for that, because the day and place of rendezvous have been arranged so as to avoid the

possibility of meeting any of the regular liners, and I have been careful to ascertain that no British warship will just then be under orders to cross the Atlantic, either from the North American station or from England. As for the piracy, I don't think we need trouble ourselves about that. Before many weeks France must forestall Germany's attack; Russia will, as we say, maintain the attitude of benevolent neutrality until she hears that we have got the works, then she will demand the surrender of the British concessions in China which conflict with her interests, and there will be war, and our actions, however drastic, will become legal under the law of war. In fact, my dear papa, as far as I can see, there is really only one possibility that I have not reckoned with, and that, as far as I can see, is an impossibility."

"And what is that? It is just as well we should see them all."

"It is the possibility that these English or Americans—you know how quick they are at all practical methods, pig-headed and all as they are at diplomacy—have, by some means or other, guessed that the French and Russian Polar expeditions have started at rather a suspicious time; I mean just when the Storage Works—these wonderful works, which are to light the world by electricity for a few pence an hour, and give us displays of the *Aurora borealis*, just as we have fireworks at public fêtes, and all the rest of it—have been completed. Now that, if you like, would be dangerous; for in such delicate work as ours success depends on surprise. Still, as I say, it is hardly possible."

"Practically impossible, I should agree with you, my dear Sophie," said the count, making the greatest mistake of his diplomatic career; "practically impossible. What do they know? What can they suspect?"

"Unless—unless," said Sophie, suddenly, clenching her hands, "our good friend Adelaide de Condé, who, I tell you, papa, is in love with Shafto Hardress, if woman ever was in love with man, unless she has hinted at the real meaning of these expeditions. Yes; that is a danger which, I admit, I have not counted."

"Yes, yes; I think I see what you mean," replied the count; "she is a Frenchwoman, but her only interest in the destiny of France consists in the restoration of the House of Bourbon to power; still, being a Frenchwoman, and in love, as you believe, she would also do anything for the sake of the man she loves, even to the ruin of her own hopes. Finally, being on this supposition the rival of Miss Vandel, she would stop at nothing to prove her devotion to him; and, if she did as you suggest, Sophie, it would be a very formidable condition of affairs indeed."

"Then, papa," she replied, coming and laying her hand on his shoulder, "do you not see that that is all the greater reason why this scheme of ours must be carried through? You see that Adelaide de Condé may herself become a source of the greatest danger; but when we have not only her, but Miss Vandel and the man they are both in love with, as well as the two papas and Lady Olive, completely in our power, when, for example, we could land

them all on one of those drifting ice-floes, to float away to somewhere where no one but the seals and bears would know what had become of them, the game would be in our hands to play as we please."

"My dear Sophie," said the count, laying his hand upon hers, "I am delighted to see that you have the courage of your convictions. And now, it is very late, or, rather, early, and I think you may as well go to bed and dream of success, for you have convinced me that failure is, to all intents and purposes, impossible."

As Sophie Valdemar stole quietly away to bed Clifford Vandel was finishing a long cable dispatch in cipher to Doctor Lamson, giving him a complete account, so far as he knew, of all that had been taking place in Europe during the last few weeks, and concluding with the words: "I have good reason to believe that the supposed French and Russian Polar expeditions, which will be in your latitude in a few weeks, are really intended for the capture or destruction of the Storage Works; so take every possible precaution against attack or surprise."

CHAPTER XV

WHILE all this plotting and counter-plotting had been going on in England and Europe, and France, thanks to what some might call the patriotic treachery of Victor Fargeau, was rapidly preparing for an invasion of Germany, which a magnificently-equipped army of nearly four million men meant to make a very different affair to the last one; while Russia was swiftly and secretly massing her huge military and very formidable naval forces in the near and far east, and England had, as usual, been muddling along, chattering over reforms on land and sea without getting them done; and while Germany, for once about to be taken unawares, was quietly getting ready for the inevitable struggle, a quiet, broad-browed, deep-eyed man had been at the head of an army of workmen, building up what was intended to be the real capital and governing centre of the world. In the midst of a broad, barren plain, broken by great masses of rock, many of them snow-capped and ice-crowned even in the middle of the northern summer, there rose the walls and chimneys of what looked like a commonplace collection of factories, such as might be found in any of the manufacturing districts of Europe and America.

About four miles to the west, under a rocky promontory which the discoverer of this desolate land had named Cape Adelaide, little thinking what a

connection it would have with another Adelaide, there was a small natural harbour, navigable for about five months in the year, constantly crowded with colliers. For over a year it had been packed with them. Before the previous winter set in they had been laden with coal and machinery and building materials, and throughout the long winter Doctor Lamson had relentlessly pushed the work on under rows of electric lights, which rivalled the *Aurora* itself.

The men were well housed and fed and lavishly paid, and so, in spite of the cold and darkness, they had worked well and cheerfully, well knowing that it was impossible for them to get back, save in the steamers that brought them. By the time the ice broke and the vessels were released another long line of them was already making its way up through the still half-frozen waters of Davis Strait and Lancaster Sound, laden with more coal, materials, and machinery. A telegraph line had been taken from Port Nelson across Hudson Bay over Rae Isthmus, and then through the Gulf of Boothia to the works, and this put Dr Lamson in direct communication with Winnipeg and the rest of the world.

At intervals of two hundred miles, across the icy desert of the north, groups of huge steel masts, three hundred feet high, had been erected, and these had been continued singly or in pairs over all the principal elevations of the North American Continent, and also over Greenland and Iceland to the north of Scotland, and thence to the rest of the British Islands. It was a miracle that could only have been wrought by millions, but the millions were spent

without stint, in the full knowledge that they would be repaid in the days when it was possible to tax the world for the privilege of living.

The Storage Works were in the form of a square, measuring four hundred feet each way. In the exact centre of an interior square measuring fifty feet each way was that mysterious spot of earth where the needle of the compass points neither to north nor south nor east nor west, but straight down to the centre of the globe; and over it was built a great circular tower, forty feet in diameter and a hundred feet in height, which contained a gigantic reproduction of the instrument which had stood on Doctor Emil Fargeau's table in his laboratory at Strassburg on that memorable night when he had completed the work which was destined to lead to his own ruin and death and to the revolutionising of the world.

From this tower ran underground, in all directions, thousands of copper cables leading to the gigantic storage batteries with which the greater part of the buildings were filled. In the middle of each side of the great square a two thousand horse-power engine was ready to furnish the necessary electrical force in the absorber, as the great apparatus in the centre was called.

Everything was in order to commence work; in fact, Doctor Lamson had just decided that he would try his engines together for the first time, when Clifford Vandel's telegram reached him from Southampton.

His agent in Winnipeg had kept him well informed of the principal events going on in the world during

his long isolation, and the sailing of the French and Russian Polar expeditions *via* Davis Straits had not escaped him. For a few minutes after he had read the dispatch he walked up and down the telegraph room, into which no one but himself and Austin Vandel, Clifford's nephew and his own general manager, could under any circumstances gain admission, since none but they knew the combinations of the lock which opened the steel door.

Austin was sitting at the table where he had received the message, and he broke the silence by saying:

"I guess, doctor, that looks a bit ugly. I suppose it's that Alsatian Frenchman and that pretty Frenchwoman you were telling me about that's fixed this up."

"There's not the slightest doubt about that," said Lamson, whose enthusiasm for the great scheme had quite overcome his earlier scruples. "If we had only known of that other set of specifications, and managed to get hold of them somehow—still that wouldn't have done much good, because even then the Frenchwoman, this beautiful daughter of the Bourbons as they call her, would have given it away as soon as she guessed what we were doing; and if she hadn't done so—well, Fargeau would have done so; so I suppose after all it's inevitable."

"Then you think we'll have to fight for it?" said Austin.

"If those expeditions are really armed forces, and their object is to take these works by hook or by crook, of course we must," replied Lamson. "Poor devils! I wonder what they'll feel like when we turn the disintegrators on them?"

"Don't talk about those," said Austin. "Time enough for that when we have to use them to save ourselves—which the Lord forbid. I sha'n't forget that experiment of yours on poor Hudson's body; but to see it turned on to a living man! Great Scott!"

"Yes; it won't be very pleasant," said Lamson, whose rather gentle and retiring nature had become completely transformed under the influence of the gigantic possibilities which were now at his disposal. "But suppose they get their ships up to Port Adelaide? —it's rather curious, by the way, that it should have the same name as that Frenchwoman, who, I suppose, is by this time about our most dangerous and determined enemy—but suppose they get them there, and begin knocking the works about with big guns. Suppose," he went on, with something like a shudder, "a shell bursts in the absorber, where are we? And, mind you, if they come they'll bring Fargeau with them; and if they took us prisoners or killed us, he would have material enough here to make another one—and he would know how to do it. No, no, Vandel; if I have to defend the works I'll do it. My whole life and soul are here now, and no Frenchman or Russian sets foot inside here while I'm alive, unless he comes as a prisoner."

"But look here," said Austin; "couldn't you paralyse 'em? Why not set the engines to work, and mop up this world's soul, or whatever you call it, right away, so that their engines should break down long before they got here, and just freeze them out."

"That, my dear Austin," replied the doctor, "is

a rather more hasty remark than I should have expected you to make. Don't you see that if we were to start the engines, and cut off our American communications, as would be necessary, we should not only paralyse the expedition, we should also paralyse the whole of Canada and the United States, cut off our communications with England, and make it impossible for our friends to communicate with us, or for them to come here—as they are doing this month."

"Guess I spoke a bit too soon," said Austin. "That's so; and, of course, we couldn't do it."

The doctor continued his walk up and down the room for a few moments longer, then stopped and said suddenly, "No; but I'll tell you what we can and will do if there's going to be any of this sort of foul play about. The president and all our friends will be much safer here than in any other part of the world, for if we have to starve the world out they'll be all right here. Wire to your uncle; say that we have received his message and are acting upon it, and tell him to bring the whole party here with the utmost speed; call it a pleasure-trip or a tour of inspection, or what they please, but they must come at once, and, above all, they must get here before these so-called Polar expeditions."

"That's the talk, doctor," exclaimed Austin; "you've got right down on to it this time. I'll fix that up in the code and send it right away."

There is, of course, neither day nor night during June in Boothia Land, only a little deepening of the twilight towards midnight, but the message was despatched *via* Winnipeg a little after nine in the evening, according to conventional time, and so

Clifford Vandel was able to decipher it in his sitting-room at Orrel Court before breakfast the next morning. The carriages were already waiting to take the party down to the *Nadine's* berth at Southampton Water as soon as possible after an early breakfast, for there was to be a race round the Isle of Wight for cruising yachts that day, and some of the finest yachts in the two hemispheres were going to compete, the *Nadine* and several other steam-yachts, including the *Vlodova*, belonging to the Grand Duke Ruric, were to follow the race, and the day was to wind up with supper at Clifford Vandel's bungalow at Cowes.

Therefore the moment he had finished translating the cipher, without waiting even for breakfast, he sent his man to ask Lord Orrel and his son for the favour of a few minutes' private conversation in his lordship's library. This man was the brother of the Countess Sophie's French maid—deaf, handy, silent, and wonderfully well up to his work. He had engaged him on the count's recommendation, after dismissing his English valet on the instant for, as he thought, trying to learn more than he ought to know from his correspondence. It is scarcely necessary to add that Ma'm'selle Sophie knew as much about the one as she did about the other; and, as a matter of fact, she had procured both appointments. This being so, it was only natural that within a very few minutes Count Valdemar and his daughter should have heard of the receipt of the telegram, and Clifford Vandel's request for an interview with Lord Orrel and his son. The immediate result was two interviews before breakfast instead of one.

"What can it mean, papa?" said Sophie, when she had softly locked her father's door. "Jules says that the dispatch was brought up from Southampton this morning. Before he gave it to Mr Vandel he, of course, steamed the envelope and looked at it. It was in cipher, as one might expect; but it came from Winnipeg, and Winnipeg is the one point of communication between Boothia and the rest of the world. Mr Vandel translated it at once, and immediately went to talk to Lord Orrel and the viscount about it. I wonder whether—but no, that's impossible. We couldn't have been overheard, and no one that knows anything of our plans could have any possible inducement to betray us. The marquise told me that she had a letter from Fargeau yesterday: I wonder if she has said anything."

"My dear Sophie," replied her father, "as I told you the night before last, a woman in love is a woman lost to all purposes of diplomacy, unless her interests and those of the man she is in love with are identical. Here they are diametrically opposed; a word from her to the viscount would ruin everything—at least, so far as the expeditions are concerned."

"All the more reason then," said Sophie, clenching her hands, "that we—I mean that the *Vlodoya* should capture the *Nadine* with all these people on board her. If we have them at our mercy we have everything. I would give a good deal to know what there was in that dispatch that Clifford Vandel had this morning."

"And so would I," replied her father; "a great deal. Do you think that if your maid were to pro-

mise her brother, say £500, for the transcription which Vandel must have made of it, there would be any chance of getting it?"

"We can only try," replied Sophie. "The old gentleman is very careful about his papers, they tell me; still, we will try."

. . . . . .

"Well, gentlemen," said Clifford Vandel, about the same moment in Lord Orrel's library, "I think you will agree with me that the doctor would not have sent a dispatch like this without pretty good reason; and if these people mean pushing matters to extremity, why, of course, it might be necessary for him to, as he says here, freeze them out, in which case they couldn't get there. And if they couldn't we couldn't; wherefore it seems good reasoning to say that we ought to be there first—if we're going to get there at all."

"My dear Vandel," replied his lordship, "it is the best of reasoning; and I am quite sure that Doctor Lamson would not have dreamt of sending such a dispatch without good reasons, and I think I am justified in telling you that this morning I received a confidential letter from an old colleague of mine in the Foreign Office, in which he says that, according to reports of our agents, both in France and Germany, an outbreak of hostilities may occur at any moment within the next few weeks, without warning—just as it did in 1870."

"Then," said Hardress, sharply, "if that is so, there simply must be some connection between that and the dispatch of these two expeditions. I don't often jump to conclusions, Mr Vandel, but I think

now that Miss Chrysie was perfectly right. They're not going to try and get to the Pole at all. It's the Magnetic Pole they want, and they'll be there this summer if we don't find some way to stop them; and I quite agree that we ought to get there first. It may be necessary to show Europe that they can't get on without us, even in the matter of fighting."

"Very well, then," said Lord Orrel, "we'll call that settled; we'll make it a summer Arctic trip. How soon can you get us across the Atlantic, Hardress?"

"I can land you in Halifax in six days. We'll coal up there; and, if we're not too much crowded with ice, I'll get you to Rae Isthmus in six days more. Meanwhile I will telegraph to Lamson to have one of his steamers waiting for us on the other side of the Isthmus, and in another week, including the land travel, which may be difficult, we will be at the works. Or, if we find the sea fairly clear, we'll steam straight up to Fox Channel, Kury's Strait, and take you straight to Boothia Land. At any rate, the expeditions are only just starting, one from Havre and the other one from Riga, and, at that rate, we should certainly be there a clear month before them, even if they really are going."

"Then," said Clifford Vandel, slowly but gravely, "if that's so, I guess the best thing we can do is to get there as quickly as possible and start the circus as soon as we can. If Europe means fighting—well, we can't have a better way of proving our power, and showing France and Germany and the rest of them that it will pay them to deal with the Great Storage Trust, than by just making their own war

impossible. When they find they can't even fight without our permission, I guess they'll pretty soon come to terms."

"I agree with you entirely, my dear Vandel," said Lord Orrel.

CHAPTER XVI

THAT same morning, as it happened, Adelaide received a letter from Victor Fargeau, dated from Paris, telling her, among other things, that the two alleged Polar expeditions would be ready to start in a fortnight's time, and that he had been appointed to, as he put it, the scientific command of the French one. There had been a considerable amount of veiled friction between the French and Russian governments as soon as they had both been compelled to admit to each other the true object of the expeditions, and it was even suspected that the Russian government was secretly preparing a much more formidable scientific expedition of four vessels—including their celebrated ice-breaker *Ivan the Terrible*, a vessel built in an English yard for the purpose of breaking up the Baltic ice in winter, in order to keep the ports free and the Russian Baltic squadron always serviceable.

With such a vessel, to lead it the Russian expedition would be quite certain of reaching Boothia Land whatever the condition of the ice might be, because she would be able to clear a course for her consorts through it. All the probabilities were, therefore, in favour of the Russian squadron getting to Boothia Land first. If they did that, and were successful in getting possession of the works, it was not very likely that Russia would be inclined to

share the dominion of the world with the ally she had already bled so freely, and in this case France would be once more robbed of the fruits of his father's discovery.

Soon after afternoon tea on the lawn of Clifford Vandel's bungalow, Adelaide said to Sophie, as they sat in their deck-chairs beside each other:

"I am given to understand that Russia is quite determined to reach the Pole, if possible, in this next expedition."

"The Pole?" laughed Sophie, with a swift glance under her half-lowered eyelids. "My dear marquise, surely you are joking with me a little unnecessarily. Which Pole?"

"Really, my dear countess, I am speaking quite seriously," she replied, turning her head on her cushion, and looking at her companion with somewhat languid eyes. "I presume, of course, it must be the North Pole—because I hear from a quite reliable source that your government is sending out the big ice-breaker—the *Ivan the Terrible*, you know; and that would hardly be necessary to get to the other Pole, the one that you perhaps mean, unless, of course, they wished to make certain of getting there as quickly as possible."

Sophie would have given a great deal to know the source of this information, which had only reached her father a day or so before, but it was, of course, impossible for her to ask, so she contented herself with saying, in slow, careless tones:

"Really, that is quite interesting. But then, of course, you know, when Russia takes anything like this in hand she generally does it thoroughly, and,

of course, the ice may be late this year, as they call it, crowded up in the narrow places I suppose; and in that case, of course, the French expedition will find it accommodating to have a ship like that to break the way in advance—and out again if necessary. I suppose you have quite decided to take the trip across the Atlantic on the *Nadine?*"

"Oh yes; that is quite arranged. It will be my first visit to America—that wonderful land."

"America—wonderful? Well, I should say!" said Miss Chrysie, coming behind them at this instant and putting her hands on the backs of their chairs, "It's a pity you can't come too, countess. I guess I could promise you both a pretty interesting time from Niagara right away to——"

"Suppose we say the Magnetic Pole?" murmured Sophie, turning her head back, and looking up at her with a glance that was lazy and yet full of challenge.

"Well, yes, that might be interesting, too," replied Miss Chrysie, looking steadily down into her eyes. "Those works that the viscount and poppa are getting fixed up there, whatever they mean them for, must be something pretty wonderful, for they're spending quite a lot of money on them. It might not be impossible that we'll be going up to see them some day, and if you'd come across, countess, I dare say I might be able to show you round."

"Really, that's more than kind of you, Miss Vandel; but I'm sorry to say that my father's official duties demand his presence at Petersburg, and we absolutely must leave when the house-party at Orrel Court breaks up; but excuse me, I see my father beckoning to me. I will leave you my seat, Miss Vandel."

She got up, and walked away forward to where her father was standing near the verandah. Miss Chrysie took possession of her seat, clasped her hands behind her head, stretched out her legs till a pair of dainty pointed toes peeped from under the hem of her dress, and said, with a sidelong glance at Adelaide, and in a slow drawl:

"Nice girl the countess, marquise, and very good-looking—very; but, somehow—well, perhaps you haven't noticed it, but I have—she seems to have a sort of way of talking at you instead of to you, and always meaning just something a bit different to what she says."

"It is quite possible," said Adelaide, slightly coldly, for Chrysie's words were just a little too frank to please her taste; "but, you see, she's a Russian; and the daughter of a diplomat. All Russians of good family are born diplomatists, and diplomacy, you know——"

"Why yes," laughed Chrysie; "diplomacy is the whole art and science of saying one thing and meaning another, and getting the other fellow to believe that you're telling the ironclad truth when you are lying like Ananias; and I guess the countess hasn't learnt her lessons very badly."

"In other words, Miss Vandel," said Adelaide, with a laugh that had a note of harshness in it, "you think the Countess Valdemar is, to put it into quite brutal English, a liar."

"Why no," replied Chrysie, looking straight down at her shapely toes; "just a diplomatist, or, I should say, the daughter of one. But we don't want to pull each other to pieces like this. What's the matter

with changing the subject? What's your idea, marquise, about these two Polar expeditions being started off this year? Doesn't it strike you as just a bit curious that they should be going north up Davis Straits just when our Storage Works are getting finished? Shouldn't wonder if the countess gave herself away a bit when she spoke just now about the Magnetic Pole."

This was a kind of diplomacy that was entirely strange to Adelaide, and for a moment or two she hardly knew what to say; then she replied, rather languidly:

"Really, Miss Vandel, it is a matter that interests me very little. I believe this is the proper time for setting out on Polar expeditions, and you know the Russians are very fond of making these journeys in the interests of science and exploration."

"Mostly exploration of what's going to be new Russian territory," replied Miss Chrysie, with a snap of her eyes. "Ah, here's his lordship junior. Well, viscount, I've got to thank you for yet one more just entirely delightful day!"

Before Hardress could reply she turned another sidelong glance on Adelaide. In spite of all her self-control, Adelaide's cheeks flushed ever so slightly and her eyes lighted up as Hardress pulled a chair towards them.

And she hated her frankly and cordially for it; for she was a girl of absolutely honest feelings, and just as straightforward and thorough-going in her hates as in her loves.

"My dear Miss Vandel," replied Hardress, "it is quite the other way about; it is I who have to thank you for the pleasure of giving you pleasure."

"After that," laughed the marquise, turning her lovely eyes full on his, "let it never be said that an Englishman cannot turn a compliment."

Chrysie noticed that Hardress flushed a little and dropped his eyes slightly under that bewildering glance, and she hated the marquise more intensely than ever.

"It was no compliment, I can assure you," he said, looking up at Chrysie, "though what the marquise just said may have been. But, by the way, I came to tell you a rather serious piece of news, marquise; and something that may perhaps influence your aunt's plans."

"Ah, what is that?" said Adelaide.

"Well, from the telegram my father has just received, which will probably be in the papers to-night, there is going to be a tremendous military scandal in Germany, which may have very grave results indeed, even to the extent of an European war. The detectives of the military staff at Berlin have discovered a sort of Teutonic Dreyfus—a young fellow holding the rank of lieutenant, and employed as a sort of military under-secretary in the bureau of the Minister of War. To a certain extent it's the old story. He had ruined himself with gambling and horse-racing, and, not content with that, had got involved with a very pretty and equally unscrupulous French variety actress, who bled him with apparently more consistency than she loved him. The agents of the French secret service in Germany got hold of him and he sold himself.

"So far the story is commonplace—that sort of thing happens every week in all countries—but the

extraordinary thing about this is that when this young fellow was confronted with proofs, he not only made a clean breast of what he had done, but he told his chiefs that the man who had been mostly instrumental in getting him into trouble, and had, in fact, introduced him to the woman who ruined him, was a brother officer—a staff-captain and military attaché of a foreign court. This man, he confessed, had obtained, partly through him and partly through his own knowledge and other sources, a complete sketch of the German plans, both for invading France and resisting a French invasion, together with all the necessary details as to men, guns, transports, etc. Stranger still, a German staff-officer answering exactly to the description, resigned his commission nearly a year ago, and retired into private life. He was not a German, but an Alsatian. The German secret agents in Paris took up the scent, and found that this very man had been in close communication with the Minister of War and appeared to be holding some confidential position in the service of the Ministry. Now Germany, it is rumoured, has demanded his extradition on a charge of treason and desertion; for it seems that his resignation was never officially accepted, although he was allowed to go in consequence of some family trouble which brought disgrace upon his name. France has refused it, and—well, the situation may be described as distinctly strained."

"Well," said Miss Chrysie to herself, while he was speaking, "if that's not a pretty good sample of diplomacy, I've got a wrong idea of the word altogether." She had turned her head lazily on the

cushion again, every now and then glancing at Adelaide's face. Hardress had, of course, done the same repeatedly during his narrative, which he had told just as though he were telling some absolutely fresh piece of news to a couple of listeners who would only take an outside interest in it. Since her father's death Adelaide had given no sign that he had told her anything on his deathbed, or that she was aware of the true nature of the Great Storage Scheme. Now she kept her composure admirably under the double scrutiny. Chrysie fancied that she changed colour ever so little at the mention of the German staff-officer who had resigned, and of the visits to the French Minister of War, but otherwise she gave no sign, she just sat and listened, every now and then drawing the point of her parasol across the grass at her feet, and occasionally looking out over the water dotted with a multitude of crafts coming to an anchor after the day's racing. Certainly neither of them found any reason so far to believe that the story had anything more than a general interest for her. When she spoke her voice was just as low and sweetly quiet as ever it was.

"Certainly that is very serious news," she said, looking straight at Hardress. "We know, of course, that there has been great tension between the two countries for some time, and if France refuses to give this man up there can hardly be anything but war; and yet if it is true that France possesses all the German plans, Germany would be at a terrible disadvantage, for it would be impossible to change them at the last minute. At any rate, I am very much obliged to you for your early information,

viscount. Certainly I think it would be better for my aunt to remain in England for the present; and in that case, I am afraid it will be my duty to remain with her."

"Not at all, my dear marquise," said Hardress, with an eagerness which Chrysie did not at all appreciate. "You know your aunt was a great yachtswoman some years ago; she's a splendid sailor, and there's lots of room on board the *Nadine*. Let her come to Canada with us. The voyage would do her all the good in the world. We can land you with Miss Vandel and Olive at Halifax. and you can have a delightful run through Canada and the States under my father's protection, while the president and I pay our visit to the Storage Works."

"A thousand thanks, my dear viscount," replied the marquise; "but that, of course, will be a matter for my aunt alone to decide. For my part, I can only say that I shall be delighted if she says yes."

"I sha'n't," said Miss Chrysie, with great emphasis, in her soul.

Meanwhile another conversation on the same subject was going on in another part of the lawn. A messenger-boy had about half-an-hour before brought the count an envelope containing a lengthy telegram; and it was when he had read this that he had beckoned to Sophie, and she had scarcely joined him when one of the servants brought her a note which had been left by a man at the gate of the grounds. They left the verandah where the count had been standing, and strolled down towards the water.

"Well, papa," said Sophie, "I saw you had a telegram just now. Any news?"

"News? Yes," said the count; "and very serious, too. Briefly, the German government has discovered everything about Fargeau—that is to say, his treason and his connection with Ducros—and has demanded his extradition from the French government. France, having got the plans, will, of course, refuse, and then there will be war—probably in a week or two."

"And Russia?" queried Sophie, looking up at him.

"Russia, my dear, as you understand, will act as circumstances direct."

At this moment the note was put into Sophie's hands. She opened it, read it, dismissed the servant, and said in a low voice:

"Papa, here is even more serious news than yours. This is from my friend the engineer. He tells me that the viscount has suddenly altered his plans; that the *Nadine* is to be filled with coal to her utmost capacity, and all preparations made for crossing the Atlantic at full speed, instead of about twelve knots."

"And she can steam twenty knots," said the count. "I'm afraid, my dear Sophie, that completely upsets your nicely-arranged plan for a rendezvous in mid-ocean. The *Nadine* will be across the Atlantic before the *Vlodoya* can get there, for her best is only about sixteen."

"No, papa," said Sophie, "I've not failed yet. If my engineer is only faithful, and that accident to the machinery happens, we shall get them all the same. I will promise him anything and everything,

and he will be faithful. And then I have another plan."

"Ah! And that?"

"The marquise—she will be on board—she's a Frenchwoman, she loves this Hardress, and hates this American girl. Sooner or later she knows that it must be war to the knife between them, and better sooner than later, for they say that he is already half-betrothed to Miss Vandel. At the same time, Hardress is by no means indifferent to her own fascinations. I will make her an ally—for the present, at least. She knows well enough that were the American conveniently disposed of she could soon console the viscount for his loss. I will show her how she may be got rid of, and how she, Adelaide de Condé, may marry the man who may, as she believes, soon be master of the world. A clever woman with a great end to gain will be of infinite service to us on board the yacht. At present she is half-hostile to us—for she has a suspicion that our expedition is meant to forestall the French one. Now I will make her wholly our friend by showing her how she may not only gain the desire of her heart, but also ensure the success of the French expedition; for, after all, you must remember that we are bound to co-operate with them to a certain extent, for they at least have been clever enough to keep the specification of the works to themselves, and till we get possession of them we can do nothing without Fargeau, even if we were masters of the works. Yes; I think, after all, Adelaide, since she must be either friend or enemy, will be a better friend than enemy: and friend she shall be before she sails on the *Nadine*."

CHAPTER XVII

'AND so, Ma'm'selle la Comtesse, it comes to this: you would have me reward hospitality with treachery? You would have me betray my host, my father's friend, and his son, into the hands of Russia?—for that is what it would come to. No; I thank you for your kindness and condescension in taking me into your confidence, but I cannot consent to become your accomplice."

Adelaide de Condé had just been listening, in her own sitting-room at Orrel Court, to Sophie's cunningly-worded suggestion that she should go on board the *Nadine* as her friend and ally, and assist in the capture of the vessel by certain means which she pointed out, one of which was a liberal use of drugs on the passengers and crew when the critical moment was drawing near. A few months before she would have entered with repugnance, but without hesitation, into any scheme which bade fair to recover what she considered to be an inheritance which the fates had robbed her off; but since then she had learnt to love Shafto Hardress as she had never believed she could love any man; and love had wrought its usual miracle. She hated Chrysie Vandel with the whole-hearted hatred of her impetuous and masterful Bourbon spirit; she looked upon her as one of her ancestors would have looked upon an usurper or an invader — something to be

abolished or suppressed, at any price and by any means. Her father, too, she thoroughly hated—not only through personal antipathy, but as one of those who possessed something that should have been hers. To Lord Orrel and Lady Olive she was practically indifferent; and, so far as they were concerned, she would have entered even willingly into any scheme which promised to take from them what they had taken from her. For the Franco-Russian alliance she cared little, yet she would infinitely prefer to see France sharing the control of the world with Russia than that it should be in the hands of an Anglo-American business syndicate. Moreover, was there not that promise made to her father long ago by an exalted personage, that, since Russia would prefer a monarchy to a republic as a friend and ally, she would not look unfavourably on the restoration of the House of Bourbon in the person of the prince, should circumstances—such, for instance, as a victorious war fought with Russia's aid—make such an event possible. Many a time, indeed, she had even been ready to curse this unfortunate love which had come into her life to shake her resolution and spoil her purpose. But for that how easy it would all be, especially with an ally—brilliant, daring, and unscrupulous—like Sophie Valdemar; and yet, how could she help to betray the man she loved, even to destroy her rival and get him for herself? So, after a long pause of thought, she repeated again, aloud:

"No, no; I couldn't do it. It would be too base."

"My dear Adelaide," replied Sophie, familiarly, and almost affectionately, "I hope you will forgive me if I suggest that the attitude you have taken up,

dignified and virtuous as I admit it looks at first sight, is really a trifle absurd."

"Really, countess," replied Adelaide, frigidly, "if you are going to forget your manners, I think the conversation may as well end. You have sought to tempt me to an act of treachery, and because I refuse, you begin to forget your manners. You seem to have forgotten, also, that you have put it into my power to warn the viscount and his friends of the danger you have prepared for them."

This was, of course, a danger which Sophie had foreseen. It was a grave one; but she was accustomed to run risks, and she was ready for this one.

"My dear Adelaide," she replied, still with the most perfect good humour, "please don't get angry with me. We have always been very good friends, and I think this is the first time you have called me countess for years. Don't take the trouble to be formal any more, but just be sensible and listen. I am not tempting you at all. I am simply trying to help you against our common enemy, and I am asking you to help France and Russia in the great and good work of wresting the command of the world from these upstart Anglo-Saxons, and reducing them once for all to their proper place. You are not a friend to the Republic; neither am I, nor any of us, for the matter of that. But you are a Frenchwoman, who ought to be Queen of France, and, if all goes well with us, may be."

"What," exclaimed Adelaide, taken off her guard for a moment, "do you mean that, Sophie? Do you believe that Russia——"

"Would not rather have as an ally a monarchy—

the old monarchy of France, ruled over by your most gracious majesty, than a republic, managed by a plebeian pack of stockjobbers and shopkeepers? Do you know why your lamented father the prince was such a welcome guest at the court of Petersburg?"

"Ah, then you know——"

"Yes," replied Sophie, taking the venture; "I do know, and I can assure you that your majesty, when the day comes, will find no stronger partisan than I shall be. My father, too, is one of your most devoted adherents, though, of course, he can say nothing about it now, and, as you know, there are other personages far more exalted."

'Yes, yes, I know," said Adelaide. "It was almost a promise."

"Help us, and you shall find that it was a promise," half guessing what the promise was. Then, pushing her advantage, she continued: "And, after all, you know, my dear Adelaide, is it not a little inconsistent for you to talk of treason or betrayal. Do you really think that you would now be a guest in Lord Orrel's house any more than I should if he knew of your connection with a certain ex-captain of Uhlans, or of that visit you paid with him to General Ducros? Really, you will forgive me if I say that your suggestion as to warning the viscount about my little scheme is a trifle illogical, even if you wished to betray us, which I don't suppose you would seriously dream of. How could you do it without betraying yourself? You would have to accuse me and papa, and, through us, Russia, of an act of contemplated piracy. We should be compelled, in self-defence, to prove that you know just as much of the true nature

of the Storage Works as we do, and that you and your ex-captain are the real authors of the French expedition — in short, that you are every whit as bitter an enemy of the Trust, and all concerned in it, as we are. I fully admit that you will spoil our scheme for the time being; but, instead of being a guest of the *Nadine*, the guest of the man you love, with the power in your hand of abolishing the woman who will certainly marry him, if you don't, you would suffer the indignity of being ordered out of his house as a spy and a traitress."

The logic was as exact as it was pitiless, and Adelaide de Condé saw that Sophie Valdemar was, for the time being at least, mistress of the situation. She had come to Orrel Court as a guest, with the full intention of playing a double part. She had played it until one day she had chanced to overhear a few half-tender, half-chaffing words pass between Chrysie Vandel and Hardress. Then she had awakened to the full certainty of what, in her inmost soul, she had long suspected — that she loved this man with all the strength of a strong and imperious nature; and since then she had been living in constant dread that he should by some means come to know her as she was.

Now the crisis had come. Sophie Valdemar had woven toils round her from which there was no escape; she must play the double part she had chosen to the end. It was the only possible chance of gratifying at once her love and her hate, and of perhaps attaining the object of her ambitions after all. She moved slowly once or twice across the room, with her hands clasped behind her back.

Sophie waited and watched her with a half-smile on her lips and a gleam of triumph in her eyes. She knew that she had won, for she could read every thought that was passing in Adelaide de Condé's soul. Then Adelaide stopped in the middle of the room and faced her, with her head slightly thrown back, and said slowly:

"Yes, Sophie; I see, after all, that you are right. I should be no more a traitor on board the yacht than I have been here, and one should help one's friends and allies rather than one's enemies. It will, of course, be an enormous advantage to our cause if this yacht can be seized. No doubt, too, there will be ciphers on board, which will enable us to communicate with the works, and if there are, that will be an immense gain to us. It shall be part of my business to find that out. Yes; I will go, and I will help you as far as I can; but there is one compact, Sophie, that you must make with me."

"My dear Adelaide," replied Sophie, warmly, and coming forward with both hands outstretched, "after what you have said I will make any compact you please that does not injure the cause of Holy Russia. She is the only God, and her service is the only religion I have, and if I make the compact, I swear to you by Holy Russia that I will keep it. What is it?"

"Then you must swear to me," said Adelaide, taking her hand, "that, whatever happens, whether we succeed or fail, no evil shall come to the viscount or his father and sister, either in person or property. If we get possession of the works, and the alliance

conquers England and America after it has disposed of Germany, they shall be considered and treated as friends, not enemies; for you must remember that until I reign as queen in Paris I propose to reign as mistress at Orrel Court. As for the American woman and her father, and all the rest of them, the sooner you get them out of the way the better pleased I shall be."

"My dear Adelaide," replied Sophie, "you looked adorable as you said those last words. Yes; of course, it shall be so; not a hair of their heads, not a centime of their property shall be touched. They shall be yours, and, as yours, sacred against all ills. That I swear and promise you in the name of Holy Russia."

"Then," replied Adelaide, looking straight into her eyes, now brilliant with the light of triumph, "I am with you to the end, whether it be good or bad, success or failure, life or death."

"And for Holy Russia and the old régime of France!" added Sophie, almost solemnly. "And now, suppose we go and join these good people on the lawn?"

As they went out, arm-in-arm, laughing and chatting as though they hadn't a care on their minds, no one would have dreamt that these two beautiful women had been a moment before plotting the ruin, not only of those whose hospitality they were enjoying, but of their country and people as well; but as Miss Chrysie saw them, her pretty brows came together for an instant, she turned aside, and said to her father in a low tone:

"That Frenchwoman and the Russian girl have

been together ever since breakfast—hatching some mischief, I'll bet. I don't like it, poppa—any more than I like the Frenchwoman coming across on the yacht. She's coming for no good, I'm sure; but the viscount's about as blind as a wall-eyed mule where that woman's concerned. Anyhow, I'll watch her pretty closely; she can bet all her titles and ancient lineage on that."

"That's right, Chrysie; and I reckon I sha'n't be sleeping much while she's around," replied her father.

CHAPTER XVIII

COWES week was over, and the house party at Orrel Court had broken up. Madame de Bourbon had yielded to her niece's earnest persuasions, and consented to become a guest on the *Nadine*. Count Valdemar and Sophie had sailed on board the *Vlodoya*, *en route* for the Baltic and Petersburg. The news which Hardress had told to the marquise and Chrysie on the lawn at Cowes had duly leaked out into the channels of the Press, and had been condensed and expanded, embroidered and commented upon with the usual luxuriant facility of the journalistic imagination.

Meanwhile the *Times* had published a lengthy and weighty communication from M. de Blowitz, which, while proving many wrong and some right, pointed unmistakably to a very grave state of affairs in Western and Central Europe. The communication also hinted, indirectly but unmistakably, at other developments which might possibly produce results as astounding as they would be unexpected.

"De Blowitz has somehow managed to get on to the secret of those two so-called Polar expeditions," said Hardress to his father at breakfast on the morning before the *Nadine* was to sail.

The marquise and Madame de Bourbon were having breakfast in their own room that morning, else he would not have said this. Only Chrysie

and her father were at the table. "He's a wonderful fellow for getting hold of news. That allusion to events proceeding in a far-distant portion of the globe is distinctly significant."

"That's so," said Clifford Vandel, "and I reckon that, under the circumstances, the sooner we respond personally to Doctor Lamson's telegram the better it will be for all immediately concerned. To tell you the square truth, Lord Orrel," he went on, looking up from his plate, "I don't quite like the turn things seem to be taking generally."

"Why, what do you mean, my dear Vandel?" asked his lordship; "you've not heard anything unpleasant, have you?"

"I've heard something, and I've seen a bit more," he replied. "I don't want to speak disrespectfully of any of your guests, but I'm bound to say I don't altogether like the cordiality that's seemed to work up during the last few days between our Russian friends and the distinguished lady who is going to honour us by her company across the Atlantic."

"Oh, come now, Mr Vandel," interrupted Hardress, in a tone which Miss Chrysie did not exactly appreciate, "surely you're not going to accuse the marquise, the daughter of my father's old friend, of anything like plotting and scheming with Russia."

"I'm not making any accusations, viscount; I'm just trying to put two and two together and make four of them. We know that if Doctor Fargeau's discovery had not fallen into our hands, or, I should say that if it had not been thrown into our hands by the stupidity of the French government, this young lady's father would most likely have become king

of France instead of dying, of what we will call mental shock, down at Elsenau; and we haven't yet got on to whether she knows anything or nothing about the scheme yet."

"Anyhow, she was in Paris at the time when this Fargeau, the son of the man whose remains we picked up, had his interviews with General Ducros, and these Russians were there at the same time. I guess that makes about two. Right after that France and Russia decide to send two Polar expeditions, both by the same route—the only one on this side that leads to the Storage Works—and both about timed to get there when we are ready to spring our little scheme on the world. I reckon that makes two more; and if you put them together you'll get about four."

"I should say five, poppa," exclaimed Miss Chrysie, putting her fish-knife down somewhat sharply on her plate. "It strikes me the whole thing's timed to fix in with this war that they're talking about. France and Russia want to get hold of the works when the war starts. If they do they'll just run creation and halve the world between them; and I reckon that makes five. What do you think, viscount?" she went on, raising her eyes and looking straight at him across the table.

"I agree entirely with Mr Vandel that we ought to get across the Atlantic as quickly as we can," he replied, rather more deliberately than she liked. "I hope, and still believe, that your suspicions are without foundation, but, at the same time, of course, we can't afford to take any risks in a matter like this; and as everything is ready, and as it is always wise

to do the unexpected in matters like this, the *Nadine* shall start to-night instead of to-morrow morning. That will give us thirteen to fifteen hours' start; and if, as you seem to think, our friends are the enemy, it may help somewhat to disconcert their plans. But, under any circumstances, it won't do any harm."

"I think, Shafto, that's a very good idea," said Lord Orrel. "In view of what is taking place in Europe and of Doctor Lamson's telegram, I really don't think we ought to lose an hour in getting across the Atlantic as quickly as possible. Of course, it is impossible for me to entertain suspicions of the character of people who have been my guests without the most absolute proof, but at any rate it it is impossible that anything could happen between here and Halifax, where we shall land Madame de Bourbon and the marquise. There we shall get more definite news from Lamson, and the telegram will give us good excuse for leaving them there; but that, of course, will depend upon the nature of the news that we get there. If there is anything really serious—well, we shall have to commit them to the care of the universal Cook, who will, of course, provide a special courier for them, and say good-bye as politely as possible."

At this moment the door opened and Adelaide came in. Lord Orrel had a somewhat high-pitched voice, and as she was opening the door, in the slow, silent way which society approves, she distinctly heard his last sentence.

"Ah," he continued, "here is the marquise herself. Ma'm'selle, we find that the yacht is ready, and that

there is no objection, unless you and Madame de Bourbon have any, to starting this afternoon instead of to-morrow morning. Both Mr Vandel and myself have somewhat urgent affairs on the other side of the Atlantic."

"My dear Lord Orrel," replied Adelaide, with a radiant smile, "pray say nothing more; the arrangement will suit my aunt and myself perfectly—and, after all, we are at your service. It is you who are accommodating us. For my part, I think it is always pleasant the first night at sea, especially in summer. One wakes up the next morning to find the sun shining, and the water dancing, and the strong salt breeze ready to give one a most glorious appetite for breakfast. What more would you? The packing, as you call it, is done. For us it is only a question of putting our hats on and going on board—and, voila, c'est fait."

She said this with such a delightful air of insouciance, and with such a radiant smile, that Miss Chrysie felt that she could have shot her there and then. Under the circumstances, she just finished her coffee and said:

"Well, Olive, if that's so, I reckon we'd better go and get fixed up too. I quite agree with the marquise that it's better to start out at night on a voyage and wake up nice and fresh next morning, especially if you don't eat too liberal a dinner before you start."

"Oh yes," said Lady Olive; "I can be quite ready by this afternoon if you can, and if it's anything like the lovely moonlight night it was last night, we shall have a perfectly delicious run through the Solent and past the Needles."

"And along the coast," added Hardress; "the moonlight will last us a bit farther than that. We shall be well away to Portland before you want to go to bed I expect. The *Nadine's* got to do her best this time, and we've coaled up for a run across the Atlantic at twenty knots. That will be somewhat of an experience for you, marquise, will it not?"

"Yes, viscount," she said, with one of those smiles which Miss Chrysie hated so; "it is a very wonderful speed that, and of course it will be an experience."

"Then that's settled," said Lady Olive, rising, "we shall start this evening. Now let us go and pack."

The *Nadine*, spick and span, and clean as a new pin, was lying alongside the ocean quay at Southampton, her bunkers and half her hold crammed with the finest steaming coal that money could buy, and the steam whistling softly in her pipes.

Her second engineer, an exceedingly clever young fellow of twenty-five, whose good-looking face was marred by a pair of too-closely-set greenish-blue eyes, was leaning on the rail a little forward of the foremast, smoking a pipe and gazing down the water with eyes that saw nothing material. Edward Williams was as good a marine engineer as ever went afloat, but unfortunately he was possessed by the idea, too common among his class, that he possessed a creative and inventive genius as well as real cleverness in his profession.

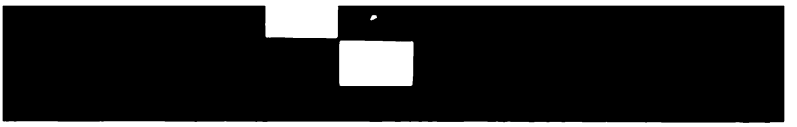
He had invented what he considered to be improvement after improvement in marine machinery, and Lord Orrel had at first helped him generously to put them into practical form; but as he did not

possess the genius, he believed he had, they had one after another failed to stand the test of practice, and at length both Lord Orrel and his son had closed their pockets and given him to understand that he had better devote himself to his profession and leave inventing alone. This produced the usual effect on such a mind as his. He forgot all that they had done for him, and looked upon them as wealthy men whose selfishness deliberately barred his way to the fame and fortune which ought to be his.

Only a month before he had gone to Hardress with the plans of a new type of submarine boat, which he, of course, firmly believed would revolutionise naval warfare. It would only have cost a few hundred pounds to build a model and demonstrate the truth of his theory, but Hardress had kindly but firmly refused to do it. This refusal had soured him utterly, and put him in exactly the frame of mind readiest to succumb to the temptation to commit the only crime of his life.

Sophie had heard something of this in conversations at the Court and on board the yacht, and she instantly divined that if she was to find an instrument to work out her scheme she would find it in the disappointed inventor—and she was right.

Like every man who believes himself to be a genius, and is not, Edward Williams was intensely vain, and when the beautiful and brilliant countess one day asked him to show her over the engines and explain their working he naturally felt intensely flattered. Then Sophie had skilfully led the conversation to his own inventions, sympathised with



him very sweetly, and assured him that in Russia such genius as his would certainly not go unrecognised. "But these English," she said, "are always the last to accept new ideas or properly reward their clever men."

After that he had been as wax in her skilful hands. She had even led him to believe she was not indifferent to him personally. After this she had infatuated him still further by giving him appointments in secluded parts of the Court grounds; and so she had gradually led up to the proposal which he had now definitely accepted.

For reasons of state, it was all-important that the *Nadine* should never reach America. Not the slightest harm was to come to anyone on board her: they would simply be brought back and landed in France, free to get home as they pleased. All that was wanted was a delay of a couple of days or so. Therefore, if the engines of the *Nadine* broke down at a certain spot in the Atlantic, and remained helpless until the *Vlodoya* overtook her, he was to receive five thousand pounds in gold and a lucrative dockyard appointment in Russia, which would give him every opportunity of working out his inventions.

To such a man, embittered by disappointment and soured by a sense of imaginary wrongs, such a dazzling temptation was irresistible; and that was why Edward Williams was leaning over the rail of the *Nadine* a couple of hours before she was to start, dreaming dreams of revenge on those who had wronged him, and of fortune and fame among his country's enemies.

The party from Orrel Court drove down to South-

ampton immediately after lunch to enable the ladies to do a little final shopping before going on board.

In the course of the afternoon Chrysie and Lady Olive went into the telegraph office to send off a few farewell wires to friends. As they entered, Miss Chrysie's quick eyes at once caught sight of Felice, the marquise's maid, leaning over one of the compartments. She touched Lady Olive's hand and nodded towards her, and said:

"I guess I'd like to see that telegram."

And then, in the most unprincipled fashion, she strolled along the compartments as though she were looking for a form, stopped a moment and looked over the maid's shoulder. Then she came back and did it again. Meanwhile the other compartments had been occupied; so she just stood about until Felice had finished, and then took her place.

As it happened, Felice had been compelled to use one of those adamantine post-office pencils which you have to almost dig through the paper before you can get a legible impression; consequently on the next form on the pad there was a distinct tracing of several words. This Miss Chrysie tore off and appropriated. Then she wrote her own message and went to the counter with it.

When they got out into the street Lady Olive said, a trifle frigidly:

"My dear Chrysie, don't you think you did a rather improper thing in there? I distinctly saw you look over Felice's shoulder. You know, here, we consider a telegram as sacred as a letter."

"Why, certainly!" replied Chrysie, flushing a little at the rebuke: "and so we do over our side:

but still, all's fair in—well—in love and war, and I guess you won't think me quite so wicked when I tell you who that telegram's addressed to."

"Really, Chrysie, I don't wish to know, and I don't think you ought to know," said Lady Olive, still more stiffly.

"Well," replied Chrysie, defiantly, "I am sorry I riled you, but I do know it; and honestly, Olive, it's what's you and I and all of us ought to know."

At this Lady Olive's curiosity appealed very strongly to her sense of the proprieties, and she said more amiably:

"Do you really mean, Chrysie, that there's something serious in it—that, for instance, it has anything to do with the works?"

"I don't know yet," said Chrysie, "but I've got a pretty good copy of it in my satchel, thanks to those awful pencils they give you to use in British telegraph offices. Anyhow, it was addressed to Count Valdemar, *Yacht Vlodoya*, Cherbourg; and Cherbourg's not on the way to the Baltic, is it? Let's go and have an ice and some cakes somewhere, so that I can read what is written."

"That's very strange," said Lady Olive, "and the Count professed to be in such a hurry to get back to Petersburg. What on earth can he be doing at Cherbourg?"

"I reckon poppa and the viscount would give something to know that, too," said Chrysie, as they turned into a confectioner's. They ordered ices, and Chrysie took the telegram form out of her satchel and unfolded it gingerly. Her pretty brows puckered over it for a few moments, as she

slanted it this way and that to get the light on it. Then she put her elbows on the little marble table, and said in a low tone:

"It's in French, and it tells the Count that the *Nadine* starts this evening instead of to-morrow morning. The last word is 'Dépêchez,' and that's French for 'Make haste,' isn't it? Now, do you think I was right in doing a very improper thing —which, of course, it was?"

"I'm afraid you were, Chrysie," said Lady Olive. "It's certainly very mysterious. How is the telegram signed?"

"There isn't any signature," replied Chrysie. "Our friend's a bit too cute for that."

"What on earth do you mean, Chrysie?" said Lady Olive, with a note of alarm in her voice. "What friend?"

Chrysie looked up and said, with a snap of her eyes: "What other friend than M'am'selle Felice's mistress—the noble Adelaide de Condé?"

Lady Olive started. To her straightforward English sense of honour it seemed impossible that a woman so gently bred as Adelaide de Condé could accept her father's hospitality, and yet send such a message as this to those who might before long be the enemies of his country.

"Chrysie," she said, "I could not believe that for a moment. It is utterly incredible that the marquise could be guilty of anything of the sort. I admit that it is very suspicious that the *Vlodoya* should be at Cherbourg instead of on her way to the Baltic, and that Adelaide's maid should send such a message; but it seems to me much more likely

that Felice is in the pay of these Russians, and that her mistress knows nothing about it."

"Well," said Chrysie, rising, "we shall see. Now I guess we'd better be getting down on board. I shall give this to the viscount, and he can have a council of war on it."

"The viscount!" smiled Lady Olive, as they went out into the street. "How very formal we are, Chrysie. Why don't you call him Shafto?"

"Because I won't let him call me Chrysie—yet," was the reply.

CHAPTER XIX

WHEN the *Nadine* left her moorings, at about four o'clock on a lovely June afternoon, she sauntered easily down to the Needles at about twelve knots. For reasons of his own her owner had never put her to full speed in crowded waters, or, in fact, where any other craft was near enough to see what she could do. On deck the principal actors in the tragedy that was to come were sitting in deck-chairs or strolling about, chatting in the most friendly fashion possible, just as though the graceful little vessel was not practically carrying the fate of the world as she slipped so smooothly and swiftly through the swirling water that ran along her white sides.

Until nightfall she continued at the same speed; but when dinner was over, and the lights were up, Hardress lit a cigar and went on to the bridge, and said to the commander:

"Captain Burgess, I think you can let her go now. Full speed ahead, right away to Halifax. As I have told you, it is most urgent that we should be there in between five and six days. Of course, everything depends on the engines, and I think it would be well to work the engine-room staff in treble shifts, just to see that nothing goes wrong. Any accident in the engine-room would mean a good deal to me. So you may tell the stokers and engineers that if everything goes

smoothly, and we get to Halifax by the 15th — that's giving you five days and a bit from now — there will be a hundred pounds extra to be divided among them when we've coaled up again at Halifax. You understand, I want those engines looked after as though they were a lady's watch."

"Certainly, my lord," replied the captain. "I hope, sir, you don't think that anything of that sort is necessary for the working of the *Nadine*; but, of course, the engine-room staff will be very glad to accept your lordship's generosity."

The captain blew his whistle, and the head and shoulders of a quartermaster appeared on the ladder, looking up to the bridge.

"Quartermaster, who is on duty in the engine-room?"

"Mr Williams, sir," replied the quartermaster, touching his cap.

"Ask him to be good enough to step up here for a moment."

"Ay, ay, sir," and the head and shoulders disappeared.

A few moments later Edward Williams came up on to the bridge. Apart from the work of his profession he was an intensely nervous man, and his imagination had instantly construed the sudden and unwonted summons into a suspicion of his contemplated guilt, and his close-set, greenish-blue eyes shifted anxiously from the captain to Hardress in a way that at once inspired Hardress with vague undefined suspicions, which somehow brought him back to one or two interviews on the subject of Williams's patents — which had ended in a way

which would have prompted a less generous man to have dismissed him on the spot. It was only a suspicion. Still, in another sense, it was the intuition of a keen and highly-trained intellect, and somehow, by some process which Hardress himself could not have explained, Williams's manner as he came on the bridge, and that sudden shifty glance, inspired him with the thought that this was a man to be watched.

"Mr Williams," said the captain, "his lordship has just informed me that it is most important we should get to Halifax in the quickest possible time; and, as you have most of the routine work to do, under Mr M'Niven, and are, perhaps, more in touch with the men than he is, I wish you to tell the men that from here to Halifax the engineers and stokers will work in treble shifts. It'll be a bit harder work, but not for long. And his lordship has kindly promised a hundred pounds to be divided among the engineer's staff at Halifax. Now, that's not bad extra pay for five or six days work, and I hope you'll see that it's earned."

"Very well, sir," replied the engineer, doing his best to keep his voice steady, and not quite succeeding. "It is, I am sure, most generous of his lordship, and I am quite certain that the men will do everything in their power to deserve it."

"And," said Hardress, noting the break in his voice, "you understand, Mr Williams, I shall expect the officers to do the same. We can take no risks this trip, and there must be no accidents or breakdowns. Time is too precious; you understand me, of course. I will see Mr M'Niven later on. That will do, thank you."

Mr Williams touched the peak of his cap, and disappeared down the ladder, feeling, in his inmost soul as though his contemplated treachery had already been discovered. And yet, if he had seen the matter from another point of view, he might have known that the precautions which Hardress had taken were, under the circumstances, just what any man carrying such enormous responsibilities as he did would have taken, for, as he had said, everything depended on the *Nadine's* engines. It was, therefore, the most natural thing in the world that everything possible should be done to ensure their perfect working. In fact, if he had not had the burden of a contemplated treachery on his soul, he would have considered the orders to be not only natural, but necessary.

As he reached the deck, it happened that the marquise was strolling forward towards the bridge. Williams raised his cap, and by the light of one of the electric deck-lamps, Hardress saw from the bridge that she looked hard at him for a moment, and that he replied with an almost imperceptible shake of the head. His brows came together for a moment, and he shut his teeth. His keen intellect saw what his half-intoxicated senses would not have seen. Under any normal circumstances, it was impossible that his guest, Adelaide de Condé, could have even the remotest relations with his second engineer, and yet there was no mistaking what he had seen as she passed under the electric light.

"Captain Burgess," he said, suddenly, in a low voice, "I don't quite like the look of Mr Williams. I have nothing against him, but I know he has a bit

of a grudge against me about those patents of his, and——"

"Surely you don't think, my lord, that he would do anything?"

"No," interrupted Hardress; "I say nothing, except that we're taking no risks this voyage; but I shall ask Mr M'Niven to have a very sharp watch kept on the engines."

"May I come up on to the sacred territory?" said a sweet, pleading voice from half-way up the bridge stairs.

"And may we too?" said the voice of Miss Chrysie just behind.

"By all means, marquise," said Hardress; "and you too, Olive, and Miss Chrysie, certainly; only I hope you've got your caps pinned on securely, because we're going to quicken up."

"Ah," said Adelaide, coming up on to the bridge with her head half-enveloped in a fleecy shawl, "quicken up. Does that mean what you call full speed?"

"Something like it, I reckon," said Miss Chrysie, coming up close behind her, followed by Lady Olive, both with white yachting caps pinned more or less securely on to their abundant tresses.

"Yes," said Hardress, with a note in his voice that Adelaide had not heard before; "it is full speed. Now, hold on to your headgear and you'll see."

As he spoke he put his hand on the handle of the engine telegraph and pulled it over from half to full speed. They heard a tinkle in the engine-room, and presently the bridge began to throb and thump

under their feet. The sharp prow of the *Nadine* had so far been cleaving the water with scarcely a ripple. Now it seemed to leap forward into it, and raised a long creased swirl to left and right. A sudden blast of wind struck their faces, hands instinctively went up to heads, and Lady Olive exclaimed:

"What is that, Shafto? It hasn't suddenly come on to blow, has it?"

"Oh no," he laughed. "We're making it blow. That's only the difference between about ten or eleven knots and twenty — and there's a bit of a breeze against us, about five miles an hour—so that makes it twenty-five miles an hour—in fact, even thirty—for knots are longer than miles."

"Now isn't that just gorgeous!" said Miss Chrysie, and she opened her mouth and filled her lungs with the strong salt breath of the sea—"and there goes my cap," she said, when she got her breath again.

The breeze had got under the peak of her yachting cap, and sent it flying aft. The pin dislocated the arrangement of her hair, and the next moment she was standing with the loosened shining coils streaming out behind her, unravelling into a shower of golden glory. Adelaide, with the instinct of a Frenchwoman, had drawn her shawl tight round her head. Hardress looked round at the moment, and, if his heart had ever wavered, in that moment the old allegiance was confirmed. There was no more comparison between the tall, deep-chested American girl, with her cheeks glowing, her eyes shining in the sheer joy of physical life, and her long gold-brown hair streaming away behind her, and the slight,

shrinking figure of the daughter of the Bourbons, cowering behind the canvas of the bridge and gripping the shawl that covered her head, than there might have been between a sea-nymph of the old Grecian legends and a fine lady of to-day caught in an unexpected gust of wind.

Miss Chrysie looked natural and magnificent, breasting the gale and breathing it in as though she loved it. Adelaide de Condé, the exotic of the drawing-room, cowered before it, and looked pinched, and shivered. Lady Olive, with one hand on the top of her cap and the other holding the wrap she had thrown round her shoulders, gasped for a moment, and said:

"Yes, Chrysie; this is glorious. Twenty knots!—that's about twenty-four miles an hour, isn't it, a little bit faster than a South-Eastern express train?"

"I hope so," laughed Hardress; "if it wasn't we should be some time in getting to Halifax. And now, I suppose, you've got some coffee ready for us down in the saloon?"

"Oh yes, it will be quite ready now," said Lady Olive. "Mr Vandel and papa have started their chess already; Madame de Bourbon is still making lace with those wonderful eyes and fingers of hers; and so, if you want to exchange the storm for the calm, come along."

A little after eleven that night, when the *Nadine*, thrilling in every plate and plank, was tearing through the smooth water of the Atlantic at nearly twenty-one knots an hour, a council of three was being held in the smoking-room on deck. The doors and windows were closed, and a quarter-

master was patrolling the deck on each side. Below in the saloon, Miss Chrysie, with a dainty little revolver in the pocket of her yachting skirt, was playing poker for beans with Madame de Bourbon, Lady Olive, and the marquise. In short, as Miss Chrysie herself would have expressed it, things were rapidly coming to a head on board the *Nadine*.

"It seems to me," said the president, "that, all things considered — thank you, viscount, I think I will take just one more peg—we have just got to take every possible precaution. I don't say that I am suspecting or accusing anybody; but, considering that we've got about the biggest thing on earth right here aboard this yacht, I don't think we should calculate on taking any risks. Take that telegram to start with. There can't be any doubt about that; and it doesn't matter whether the marquise or Ma'm'selle Felice sent it, there it is. Get it down to plain figures. This boat does twenty knots, and she started fifteen hours before her time. A telegram goes from Southampton to Cherbourg, as Chrysie's duplicate showed, clearly telling Count Valdemar, on the *Vlodoya* at Cherbourg, where he had no business to be, according to his programme, that we were sailing in the afternoon instead of the next morning, and it ended by telling him to make haste. Now, what does haste mean? We steam twenty knots, and the *Vlodoya*, we know, steams about sixteen. She started from Cherbourg, and we started from Southampton. The French and Russian Polar expeditions are perhaps under weigh now, and, from what we know, I reckon that they have a fairly good idea of what we're going across the Atlantic for. Now,

how's a sixteen-knot boat going to catch a twenty-knot yacht anywhere between Southampton and Halifax?"

"And why should Count Valdemar receive that telegram at Cherbourg, as I suppose he did," said Lord Orrel, "instead of going on to the Baltic, when he said he was in such a hurry to get to Petersburg?"

"That, I think," said Hardress, "is the most suspicious fact in the whole business. Of course, I don't like to suspect our late or our present guests, but I must confess that I feel there's something wrong. What it is I can't exactly say; but still I do feel that everything is not as it ought to be."

"And that," said the president, "I think I can explain in a few words—not my own ideas altogether, because Chrysie has given me a good many points. You know, gentlemen, there are some things that a woman's eyes can see through a lot farther than a man's can, and Chrysie doesn't always keep her eyes down."

He lit a fresh cigar, took a sip of his whisky and soda, and went on:

"Why should a telegram be sent to the owner of a sixteen-knot boat, informing him of a change of sailing a twenty-knot boat, when the sixteen-knotter is supposed to be going up the Baltic, and the twenty-knotter is going across the Atlantic? It seems ridiculous, doesn't it? It would, even if they were both going across the Atlantic, as they might be. Now, those are hard facts; and there's a dead contradiction between them, just as you might say there is between positive and negative in electricity. Now, where's the spark that's going to connect them?"

There was silence at the table for a few moments. while the president blew two or three long whiffs of blue smoke from his lips; and then Hardress, remembering his thoughts on the bridge, and what he had seen from it, blurted out, almost involuntarily:

"Something wrong with the engines, I suppose?"

"You've got it in once, viscount," said the president, flicking the ash off his cigar. "Is there any other way that a sixteen-knotter could overtake a twenty-knotter? I don't want to say anything against anyone, but, you know, accidents to engines are easily managed, and we just can't afford to have any right here."

"I've seen to that already," said Hardress. "I don't think there's any fear of a mishap, accidental or otherwise."

"But," said the president, lighting another cigar, "if it should happen that the sixteen-knotter did overhaul the twenty-knotter, wouldn't it be just as well to get that gun mounted? They may have guns on that Russian boat, and they probably have; but I don't think they'll have anything that's a circumstance to our twelve-pounder Vandelite gun."

"Well, in case of accidents," said Lord Orrel, "I think, Shafto, that it wouldn't be a bad idea to get the gun mounted at once. If, in spite of any precautions, there is going to be an accident in the engine-room, it might as well be mounted as soon as possible."

"I quite agree with you, sir," said Hardress. "We will have it out of the hold, and mount it first thing to-morrow morning."

CHAPTER XX

ON the morning of the second day out, when Adelaide came on deck, she was astonished, and not a little disquieted, to see nearly the whole of the yacht's crew, under the command of Mr M'Niven, the chief engineer, engaged in mounting a long, light, slender gun, with a very massive breech, on the flush deck just forward of the foremast. Happening to look up at the bridge, she also saw that a light Maxim had been mounted at either end of it.

What did it mean? Guns were not mounted on a gentleman's private yacht, as a rule, unless she was making some dangerous expedition in perilous waters. As for doing such a thing on the most frequented ocean path in the world, it was utterly ridiculous, unless there was some very grave reason for it—and what reason could there be, save one? Had Sophie's scheme been betrayed? Had Felice told about the telegram, under the temptation of such a bribe as these millionaires could offer? Had Williams wavered at the last, and confessed? She knew, of course, that the *Vlodoya* carried guns, to compel surrender, if necessary. Was that a reason why these guns were being mounted?—and what would happen if the *Nadine* met force with force, and won? Everything would come out; the whole conspiracy, and her own share in it; and then, what would he think of her? She had entered into the plot mainly

for the purpose of getting rid of this American rival of hers, so that she might pursue the advantage which she believed she had already gained, without opposition. The discovery would mean utter ruin for herself and all her hopes.

While these sinister thoughts were passing swiftly through her brain she heard a light step behind her, and a gay voice, saying:

"My, that looks good, doesn't it! Seems as if the viscount thought we were going to have a bit of a scrap before we got across. Yes, that's poppa's own dynamite gun; the viscount calls it his pocket-pistol. Oh, good-morning, marquise; you seem to be interested in the operations!"

"Good-morning, Ma'm'selle Chrysie," replied the marquise, sweetly. "How delightfully fresh you English and American girls always look after you've tubbed. Yes; I assure you I am very interested; indeed, I am astonished. I was not aware that it was customary to mount guns on a nobleman's yacht in times of peace."

"Well, no," laughed Miss Chrysie; "but then, you see, marquise, there is peace and peace. We are at peace with all the world, nearly, but, the fact is, this is a pretty important voyage, and, from what poppa tells me, it hasn't got to be interrupted under any circumstances."

"But surely there can be no fear of that," replied Adelaide, with a laugh which seemed to Chrysie a trifle artificial and uneasy; "the days of piracy are past."

"That's no reason why they shouldn't be revived on occasion," said Chrysie, turning round and look-

ing her straight in the eyes; "in fact, it seems to me, from one or two hints that poppa let drop, that someone is going to try and stop us getting across this time, and that's why these guns are here. That's a pretty-looking weapon, isn't it?"

"Really, Miss Vandel," replied the marquise, rather languidly, "I can assure you I know nothing about such things; and I take, if possible, even less interest in them."

"Well, marquise, I can assure you that that's a most interesting weapon. Poppa invented it. It's loaded with liquid gas instead of gunpowder, and a shell that holds twelve pounds of an improved sort of dynamite—Vandelite he calls it. Now, of course, you know that when liquid gas is allowed to become gasey gas, it makes things mighty cold round it. Well, this freezes the Vandelite so that it shan't explode in the gun. Then when the projectile hits anything, that develops heat and sets it off. Simple, isn't it? And yet that's a thing that inventors have been puzzling about for years. That gun will put twelve pounds of concentrated earthquake into a ship four miles away, and that would knock anything but an armour-clad into splinters. So I guess there'll be trouble for anything that tries to stop us this journey."

"Still, that could hardly be in these times," said the marquise, with excellently simulated nonchalance. "But, really, your knowledge of gunnery appears to be wonderful, Miss Vandel. I suppose you take a great interest in weapons of warfare?"

"Yes, I do," said Chrysie; "you see, we make all the best of them over our side. For instance," she

went on, pulling an exquisitely-finished little Smith & Wesson five-shooter out of her pocket, "there's a dainty little bit of bric-a-brac. No, don't touch it, if you're not accustomed to shooters, because it's loaded. Doesn't look very dangerous, does it? But I can pick all the spots off a card at twenty paces with it."

"Dear me, how very wonderful! And how very interesting you young ladies of the New World are. Really, the fact of your carrying a loaded revolver in your skirt pocket seems to me quite as singular as mounting guns on a gentleman's yacht. So entirely unnecessary, I should have thought."

All Adelaide's powers of self-control did not suffice to keep a note of petulance and insincerity out of her voice. Miss Chrysie's quick ears caught it instantly. She slipped her arm through Adelaide's, and drew her away out of hearing of the men who were mounting the guns, and said in a low voice, which thrilled with something very like passion:

"I'm carrying this shooter, marquise, for the same reason that they're putting those guns up. I don't know what it is, but there's trouble ahead, and we're outside the law just now, the same as others may be soon; but the man I love is on board this ship, and if there's any harm waiting for him, and quick and straight shooting will save him, I'm going to do my little level best."

It was impossible for Adelaide not to recognise the frank, direct challenge of her words. For the moment a passing impulse impelled her to snatch the weapon out of Chrysie's hand and shoot her; but another moment's thought showed her that such

an act would have meant worse than ruin to all her hopes. After what Chrysie had said, she would dearly have loved to have done it. It was the first distinct avowal of her love for the man for whom she herself had deliberately engaged to sacrifice the honour of her stainless name, and there was a ring of deadly earnestness in Chrysie's tone as she handled the deadly toy, which meant even more than her words did; and so she exclaimed, with an innocent seeming archness which astonished Chrysie quite as much as her own words had astonished the marquise:

"Ah, so, Ma'm'selle, then my suspicions were correct. Well, well, accept my best wishes for the most delightful ending possible for your romance. Nothing could be better, or what the English call more suitable—yes, in every way. And as for me, though I do not know what I have done to deserve so great a confidence——"

"I don't know that I ought to let you thank me for it," said Chrysie, flushing a little; "I guess I told you more for your good than mine, and I thought it was only right that you should know just how matters stood, in case any mistakes were made later on that couldn't be rectified—and I think that's about all that need be said just here. There is the bell: and there is Lady Olive come to tell us that tea is ready. Suppose we go below, and change the subject."

Adelaide followed her down the companion way, her face radiant and smiling, and her heart hot and bitter with many thoughts which at present she dared not translate either into words or actions. If only

the *Vlodoya* succeeded in her mission—if only the plot to which she had lent herself succeeded—ah, then there would be a difference! If not, well, the sea was deep and clear and cool, and life would have nothing left in it for her.

A little before midnight another council of war was being held in the smoking-room, guarded as usual by a quartermaster on either side of the deck, and Captain Burgess came out of his own cabin under the bridge and went to the starboard door. The quartermaster stopped and touched his cap.

"Robertson," he said, "tell his lordship that I want to speak to him at once."

"Ay, ay, sir," said the man, knocking at the door. There was a "click click" of the key turning in the lock, the door opened, and Hardress looked out.

"Oh, captain," he said, "that you? Any—do you wish to speak to me? Come in."

The captain went in, and the door was at once locked behind him.

"Sit down, captain," said Hardress, pointing to a seat. "What's the matter? You can speak quite freely. You know that there are some rather funny things going on; but you, of course, we trust absolutely."

"I hope so, my lord," said the skipper, with a touch of dignity in his tone. "I am sorry to say that just before seven bells, when we changed watch unexpectedly, as we are doing in the engine-room, one of the extra men we've put on watch detected Mr Williams in the act of sanding the driving rod of the low-pressure cylinder of the port engine."

"And what would have been the effect of that?"

said Hardress, quite coolly, as though he expected the news.

The words had hardly left his lips before a slight jarring shudder ran along the port side of the ship, and they felt a distinct swerve as though she had swung suddenly out of her course.

"The scoundrel, he has gritted the shaft as well!" exclaimed the captain, jumping to his feet and running to the door. "Pardon, my lord," he cried, as he opened it. Then he said to the quartermaster:

"Robertson, skip up to the bridge and stop her. Mr M'Niven's there."

Then as the quartermaster vanished in the direction of the bridge he locked the door, and came back and said:

"My lord, I'm afraid it's worse than I thought. You know what grit means in the bearings of a screw shaft. It means stopping one engine for twenty-four hours, unbolting the bearings and the thrust-blocks, and cleaning the grit out."

"And I guess that's just about what was calculated upon by our friends the enemy," said President Vandel. "A delay like that would just send us waddling across the water like a duck with a lame foot; and that's how a sixteen-knotter's expected to overtake a twenty-knotter. What's happening to Mr Williams just now captain?"

"Under arrest in his room, sir," replied the captain; "he's a good sailor and a good officer, but I'm afraid he's guilty. I never saw a man look more miserable than he did when I sent for him to my room. I don't know who's been working on

him, or what the reason of it is at all, but there it is. He didn't confess, but he might just as well have done, for his face did it for him."

"Then we are to understand, Captain Burgess," said Lord Orrel, "that, at the best, we shall be delayed at least twenty-four hours. That will make a serious difference to us, Shafto, under the circumstances."

"And it may be more than that, my lord," said the captain, "because we don't know yet how much harm's done. Mr M'Niven will, of course, examine the cylinder and the shafting at once and report to me, and if the worst comes to the worst, why, we may have to go to Halifax with one engine. If we hadn't twin screws we'd be disabled altogether. Yes, you see he's stopped the port engine, and that means we've dropped down to about eight knots."

"Yes, of course," said Hardress, "that's about what it comes to, father. Now, Captain Burgess, you will kindly keep Mr Williams in his cabin. Let him have no communication with anyone. You can let Robertson give him his food, and mount guard over him generally. We can trust him, if we can trust anyone. I don't want to see him, or accuse him of anything. Just keep him quiet, and isolated. Tell Mr M'Niven we'll run along as well as we can with the starboard engine, and put all available hands on to repairing the damage to the other. I'll give the engine-room staff another hundred pounds among them if they get it fixed up in twenty-four hours."

"Very well, my lord," said the captain, as he got up and went towards the door. "We shall, of course, do everything possible; and I hope that the damage is not so bad as it seems."

"It appears to me," said the president, as the captain closed the door and Hardress locked it, "that our deductions from those few facts are coming pretty correct. This job's going to keep us back twenty-four hours at least, if not thirty-six; and so, granted that the Russian yacht started pretty soon after that telegram got to Cherbourg, she won't be very far behind us to-morrow evening, and she'll probably overhaul us about by dawn the next day. Seems to me the question is now, what we're going to do if she does?"

"I say fight," said Hardress, between his teeth. "We can smash her into scrap-iron with that gun of yours before she can touch us, if she has guns; and if they do really mean foul play, as it seems they do, I fancy myself it would be better for all of us, women and all, to risk going down with the *Nadine* than to fall into the hands of a pack of Russian pirates, for that's about all they will be, if they try anything of that sort on."

"How would it be, Shafto," said Lord Orrel, "if, granted we could get the engines repaired, we were to play the lame duck, and turn the tables on them——"

"Thunder! You've just got it, Lord Orrel!" exclaimed the president, bringing his hand down on the table. "Whether the count and that pretty daughter of his are on board or not, I reckon they'll be a mightily dangerous crew to deal with, and I reckon they'll be safer as compulsory guests on board this boat than if they were free to knock around in their own ship. I feel pretty certain that they know a lot more about this scheme of ours

than they would like to say; and if that's so, as I think it is, the less they run around loose about the earth the better for us."

"I quite agree with you, president," said Hardress. "That's the very thing to do, if we can do it: if it really is the *Vlodoya* that's on our track and she means taking or sinking us; well, we'll play 'possum. We'll have to let her fire on us first, I'm afraid; but I daresay she'll miss, for Russians are about the worst gunners in the world. Then we'll cripple her, take her distinguished passengers out of her, and make them our compulsory guests. After that we'll play pirate to pirate—empty her coal bunkers into ours, strip her of everything we want, and put the crew into the boats with plenty of water and provisions. They'll be certain to be picked up within a couple of days or so if they go south towards the steamer tracks. Then we'll smash his excellency's yacht into scrap-iron, and go straight to Boothia Land without stopping at Halifax at all."

"But, my dear Shafto," said the earl, "that would be a most flagrant act of piracy on the high seas, wouldn't it?"

"My dear dad," he replied, "you must remember that once we are in Boothia we are beyond and above the law, and if we like to indulge in a little piracy we can do so. The point really is to catch these people and take them there with us; so that we can be quite certain they're not going to do any more harm."

"That, viscount," said the president, "is right on the spot; and your idea of taking the coal out of the *Vlodoya* isn't any too bad. I reckon that's just

what we've got to do. A little surprise party for our Russian friends right here in mid-ocean, and then straight away to the works. We'll show them some of the wonders from inside that they wanted to see from outside; and I guess we shall also be able to show them something pretty interesting if those two expeditions do happen to discover the Magnetic Pole instead of the North Pole. I reckon it'll be just about one of the most wonderful discoveries that Frenchmen or Russians ever did make."

CHAPTER XXI

ANOTHER two days had passed, during which the *Nadine*, instead of swirling through the water at twenty knots, had been waddling through it like a lame duck at eight.

Adelaide had professed the utmost wonder and concern at the accident, and Miss Chrysie, who now knew rather more than she did, watched her with unwinking steadiness from the time she came on deck in the morning till the time she retired with her aunt at night. Madame de Bourbon herself was completely in the dark as to everything that was taking place, and simply looked upon the breakdown of the port engine as one of the ordinary accidents of seafaring.

Adelaide had not slept for an hour continuously since she had seen the guns being mounted. That had convinced her that Hardress, whose suspicion she dreaded more than anything else, already suspected something. Williams had kept faith, and had been detected, thanks to the extraordinary precautions that had been taken in the engine-room, precautions which, so her instinct told her, could not possibly have been taken unless some design against the safety of the yacht had been either discovered or very strongly suspected.

Still, as she told herself when she was lying awake in her berth the night after the breakdown, to a

certain extent, the plot had succeeded. Williams had done the work he was paid to do, and the *Nadine* had come down from her greyhound speed to the limping crawl of a wounded hare. The *Vlodoya* would certainly overtake her now—but, then, those guns!

She knew that the *Vlodoya* was prepared to fight if necessary, and so was the *Nadine*, and, now that the question of speed had been disposed of, it would be a question of guns. But, after all, guns would not be of much use without men to fire them or officers to direct the operations. Manifestly the time had come for her to play her part in the great game whose prize was to be, for her the man she loved, and for her allies the lordship of earth.

The next day just before lunch she was strolling up and down the deck with Hardress and Lady Olive, talking about all that they were going to do when they got to Halifax, and she had turned the conversation upon Canadian and American hotels and the difference between American and European cooking, when she said:

"Ah, Monsieur le Viscomte, that reminds me. Will you allow me to give you and also your poor men who have been working so hard at the broken engine a little treat?"

"With the greatest of pleasure, my dear marquise," said Hardress. "And what is it to be?"

"Oh, it is nothing very much," replied Adelaide, in her lightest and gayest tone; "it is only that my aunt happened to mention last night that she had found in her secretaire the authentic recipe of a punch—what do you call it?—a punch of wines and

liqueurs which they used to drink at the suppers at Versailles and the Trianon in the days of the Grand Monarque. Louis himself drank it, and so did that other unhappy ancestor and his queen——"

"Who," laughed Lady Olive, "is at present reincarnate on board the *Nadine*. I suppose you mean then to make up a punch some night after this recipe; that would be delightful, if we only have the proper ingredients on board."

"Oh, they are very simple," replied Adelaide; "it is certain that you will have them, indeed it seems from the recipe that the excellence of the punch does not depend so much on the variety of the ingredients as the proportions and the skill in making it."

"Very well," said Hardress, "as long as we've got the things on board, that is settled; and both ends of the ship shall drink to-night in the punch *à le Grand Monarque*, to the health of his latest and fairest descendant. M'Niven and his men really have been working like so many niggers at that engine, and they've done splendidly. In fact, Captain Burgess tells me we shall be ready for full speed ahead by daybreak to-morrow."

"Ah," said Adelaide in her soul, "then it is all the more necessary that we should have the punch *à le Grand Monarque*," and she went on aloud, "Well then, Monsieur le Viscomte, that is arranged. If you will tell your steward, your maître d'hôtel, as we call him on French ships, to provide me with the ingredients, I will make it this afternoon, and we will take it after dinner, eh?"

"Yes," said Lady Olive, "and I think, Shafto,

under the circumstances, you might invite Captain Burgess and Mr M'Niven to dine with us."

"Certainly," replied her brother, "that's a capital idea, Olive. We will—in fact, we'll have Mr Vernon, too: he's worked just as hard as anyone else, and it can be arranged for the second officer to take charge of the bridge during dinner. And so, ma'm'selle," he went on, turning to the marquise, "if you will take the trouble, you may brew us two bowls, one for the cabin and a bigger one for the other end of the ship, and the steward shall put the whole of the ship's liquid stores at your disposal."

"Monsieur le Viscomte, I could desire nothing better," she replied, with her most dazzling smile, and more meanings than one.

The subject of the punch was mentioned during lunch, and during the afternoon Miss Chrysie got her father up into the bows, and, after a swift look round to see if anyone was within hearing distance, said:

"Poppa, are you going to take any of that punch to-night?"

"Why, certainly, Chrysie. Why not? What's the matter?"

"It may be matter or no matter," she replied, "but I'm not, and I guess it would be healthier for you not to. I'm more than ever certain that that Frenchwoman is in it. Yes; it's all very well looking like that, poppa, but—you think I hate this woman because she's in love with the viscount. Well, I suppose I do; and there'll most likely be trouble between us sometime soon; but I haven't quite lost all my senses because I happen to be in love with a

man that another woman wants to get. Don't you see, we're going to have that punch just a few hours before we get the engines right and that other boat is to catch us?"

"But, great sakes, Chrysie, you don't mean the marquise is going to poison us?"

"It won't be poison," answered Chrysie, very curtly, "because she knows that he'll drink it. I guess some drug's a good deal more likely—something that'll make everybody at both ends of the ship pretty sleepy and stupid when the time for a fight comes around. You see, that's just the natural sequence to the plot to cripple the engine. Anyhow, that's what I think it is."

"Well, if it's as bad as that," said her father, "why not warn the viscount?"

"That wouldn't do much good," she replied, more curtly than before. "You see, I'd have to make a definite accusation against her, and I've nothing to go on except what he'd call mere suspicion and we call logical deduction. I'd give her a tremendous handle against me, especially with him; and if she had any suspicion that I suspected her—why, she might call me down pretty badly by not putting anything in the stuff at all. No, poppa, under the circumstances, we can't do anything except not drink that punch. I'm going to have a headache to-night and stop in my berth. You have some of your gastric trouble and drink hot milk or something of that sort: and if you get a show I think you might, as matters are coming to a head pretty quickly, just give a hint to Captain Burgess and Mr M'Niven to drink as little of that punch as they politely can."

"Well, Chrysie," replied her father, "you've been right so far, but I do hope you're wrong this time. It's a pretty large order, you know, drugging the whole ship's company."

"Yes; and a Frenchwoman with a lot to win is playing a game for pretty big dollars. Of course, there may be nothing in it at all, and I may be quite wrong, but I think this punch of hers has come along at the wrong time, and we can't take any risks. There's one thing, she'll have to drink some of it herself, and that old aunt of hers too. Still, she's pretty useless, and doesn't matter; but if anything does really happen, poppa, you'd better go straight and shake the viscount up. I'll have the steward make some pretty strong coffee to-night for me, and I'll keep it hot and you can give it him; and if the doctor isn't dead, too, with the stuff, get a drop of prussic acid from him. That'll bring him round."

"It strikes me, Chrysie," said her father, looking down admiringly on her flushed and animated face, "as though you're getting ready to run this ship in case of trouble."

"It's just that, poppa," she said, with an impatient little tap of her foot on the deck; "that is, of course, with you. I don't say it's altogether disinterested, because it isn't; but I'd do that and a lot more to keep to windward of that Frenchwoman, and she knows it. You can work your gun and I can work a Maxim, so if there's only the two of us, we can do something with that Russian ship. And now I guess we'd better go to the other end and show how friendly we can be with our enemies."

"Chrysie," said her father, with a very tender note in a voice which could be as hard as the ring of steel, "I don't want you to be a bit different to what you are, but if you'd been a man you'd have been a great one."

"I'd sooner be a good woman and get what I want than be the biggest man on earth," laughed Chrysie. "When a woman gets all she wants she doesn't want to envy big men anything."

And with that they went aft and subsided into deck-chairs in a sort of irregular circle, in which Lord Orrel was fast asleep, Madame de Bourbon rapidly subsiding, and the marquise and Lady Olive making a pretence of reading with drooping eyelids.

The punch *á le Grand Monarque* was a great success that evening after dinner. It was delicious; and every one regretted that the president's attack of gastritis and Miss Chrysie's headache prevented them from sharing in its delights.

The marquise brewed a little pot of her aunt's special Russian tea for them, which the president declined with many apologies, and which Miss Chrysie, after accepting a cup from the hands of Felice, emptied out of the port-hole as soon as her ladyship's lady had left the cabin.

Captain Burgess and the chief had taken the president's hint almost as though they expected it, and the Scotsman had said significantly:

"I'm obliged to you, Mr Vandel, though I hope there's nothing in your suspicions; still, this is no time for us to be drinking foreign mixed drinks when I've got to keep my eyes open, looking, as you

may say, out of both sides of my head. A drop of good old Scotch whisky is as good nourishment as a man can need. What I'm thinking about is the men. We can't forbid them to take it without either insulting his lordship or telling him all the suspicions, which, you say, can't be told him."

"No," added the captain; "but I'll see they have a pretty good shaking up at four o'clock, and the cook shall have plenty of strong coffee ready in case of accidents."

But for all that, the accident happened, almost, if not quite as well as the originator of it could have hoped. By eleven o'clock everyone who had drunk even a single glass of the marquise's punch, including herself and Madame de Bourbon, were dead asleep. Even the captain and the chief engineer, who had taken somewhat drastic measures to counteract the possible effects, did not wake until daybreak, and even then, strong as they were, they were both mentally and physically incapable for the time being of attending to the work of the ship. The sailors and engine-room hands, who had indulged rather more freely, were all sleeping like logs when the watch was called at four in the morning, and nothing could wake them until Mr Vernon, the chief officer, who never under any circumstances drank anything stronger than coffee, and who therefore escaped the general paralysis, with the help of the president and the two quartermasters, who had been forbidden to touch anything in the way of liquor during the night, brought them up on deck and turned the hose on them. This revived the majority of them sufficiently to enable them to drink a copious allowance of

strong coffee, after which they were very ill, and then much better.

The captain and the chief engineer were then carried to bathrooms and treated in somewhat the same fashion, after which they were taken back to their rooms and given a good stiff brandy-and-soda.

"Ay, man!" said the chief engineer, as he began to get back his grip on things, "whatever was in that stuff it was deadly. No more of your foreign drinks for me. After that, good Scotch whisky is going to be good enough for me. It's a mercy she didn't poison the whole ship's crew. Captain, if there's any of the men anything like fit for duty you might give them a good strong tot, and let's get to work on that shaft. There's just the bearings and the thrust-blocks to adjust and oil, and then we'll be ready for full speed ahead in three hours."

"I'm afraid that would be a bit too late, sir," said Miss Chrysie, who had been sweeping the eastern horizon with her glasses. "Look yonder," she went on; "there's a steamer down yonder steaming for all she's worth, and I reckon she's a lot more likely to be the *Vlodoya* than an east-bound liner."

The chief took the glasses she offered him, and had a long look at the cloud of smoke that was rising from the ship.

"I'm afraid you're right, miss," he said, handing the glasses back. "That's no liner; she's not half big enough; she's a yacht. Still, her stern chase is a long one, even if we are like a seal with one flipper, and we may be ready for her even yet."

"I think we shall be able to dodge him, Miss

Vandel," said the captain, who had just come out of his room, still looking pale and somewhat dazed. "Put every possible hand on to the shaft, M'Niven. Steam's up, and we can start the moment you're ready."

"And," added the president, "I'll see to the guns. If that's the *Vlodoya* they're not going to overtake us before we are ready."

CHAPTER XXII

WHILE the captain and the chief engineer were mustering such men as were in any way fit to work the ship, or to help in getting the port engine into running order, Chrysie and her father paid a visit to the staterooms. Hardress and Lord Orrel were both sleeping as deeply as ever and breathing heavily. The president tried to rouse them, without avail. Their pulses were beating regularly, and, apart from their heavy breathing, there was nothing to show that they were not in a healthy sleep; but they were absolutely insensible to any outside influence; and Chrysie found Lady Olive, Adelaide, and Madame de Bourbon in exactly the same condition. Ma'm'selle Felice was in great distress about her two mistresses, but Chrysie cut her lamentations very short by saying:

"You look after your ladies, Felice, and don't worry about anything else; your place is down here, and don't you come on deck, whatever happens. There's a boat coming up that may be the same one you telegraphed to at Cherbourg from Southampton. If it is, you see this?" she went on, taking her revolver out of her pocket. "Yes, that'll do; I don't want any theatricals, but you go to your cabin and stop there. If you're wanted you'll be sent for."

Ma'm'selle Felice shrank away white and trembling,

and Miss Chrysie went back on deck to get the Maxims ready for action. She met her father under the bridge, and said:

"I reckon, poppa, they're all pretty dead down there. We'll have to see this thing through on our own hands."

The chief and his men worked like heroes on the shaft, and a good head of steam was by some means kept up, but the other yacht crept rapidly up across the eastern horizon, and by breakfast time it was perfectly plain that she was the *Vlodoya*. Moreover, both Miss Chrysie and the captain from the bridge had been able to make out with their glasses that she was carrying a Maxim-Nordenfelt gun on her forecastle, and two others which looked like one-pound quick-firers on either side, a little forward of the bridge. She was flying no flags, not even the pennant of the Imperial Yacht Squadron, to which she belonged. The *Nadine* was flying the Blue Ensign and the pennant of the Royal Yacht Squadron. When the *Vlodoya* was within about eight miles, heading directly for the *Nadine*, the president sent down to ask Mr M'Niven how long it would be before the port engine could be used, and the answer came back, "A good hour yet, but everything is going all right."

Just at this moment the captain was overtaken with another fit of sickness and dizziness, and had to go down to his room; and Mr Vernon remained in charge of the bridge with Miss Chrysie, who was walking up and down, with a strange look of almost masculine sternness on her pretty face, and the gleam of a distinctly wicked light in her eyes.

For her the minutes of that hour passed with terrible slowness as she watched the *Vlodoya* coming up mile after mile, with torrents of smoke pouring out of her funnels. She was evidently steaming every yard she could make. A quarter, half, and three-quarters of an hour passed, and still she kept on, looming up larger and larger astern, and Miss Chrysie looked more and more anxiously at the long gun on deck and the two Maxims on the bridge.

Again a message went down to the engine-room, and the answer came back — "Another twenty minutes." Just then a line of signal flags ran up to the *Vlodoya's* main truck. The chief officer's glasses instantly went up to his eyes, but after a long look he shook his head and said to the president:

"That's no regular signal, Mr Vandel; it's evidently a private one, arranged beforehand, I should say."

"Then we won't answer it," said the president, "and we'll see what he'll do next. I guess, if he's what we think him, he'll have to declare himself right away."

They hadn't very long to wait, for about five minutes afterwards a puff of smoke rose from the *Vlodoya's* forecastle, and a seven-pound shell came screaming and whistling across the water. It was the first time that Miss Chrysie had ever been shot at, but she took it without a shiver. The chief officer begged her to go below at once. But she only shut her teeth tighter, and said:

"No, thanks, Mr Vernon, I'm going to have a hand in this. I'm the only one on deck just now

that knows how to run a Maxim, and I can shoot as straight with it as I can with my own little pepper-box; so if you just let Mr Robertson come and see to the serving of the ammunition, I think we'll be able to give our Russian friends just about as good as we get."

"Say, poppa," she went on, leaning over the front of the bridge, "I reckon that shot broke the law of nations, didn't it? How would it be if you raised his bluff? Go him a few pounds of Vandelite better?"

"There's no hurry about that, Chrysie," said the president, who had got his gun loaded, and was squinting every now and then along the sights. "I guess he doesn't want to hit us; we've got too much precious cargo on board. You see, that was a seven-pound shell, and if it got under our water-line—well, we'd just go right down. If our friends are on board, they just want to scare us into surrender, that's all; so I think it would be better for us to wait further developments, and let Mr M'Niven get his work in on that shaft. I can make scrap-iron out of the *Vlodoya* just as soon as ever we want to do it; so don't worry about that."

At this moment another puff of steamy smoke rose from the deck of the Russian yacht, and this time a shell came screaming away over the *Nadine's* masts. Miss Chrysie shut her teeth a bit harder, and walked towards the Maxim on the port side, the one which she could at any time have brought to bear on the *Vlodoya*. The chief officer meanwhile stood anxiously by the engine-room telegraph. It was also his first experience of being shot at. He

was just as cool as Miss Chrysie or her father, but he didn't like it. He had the Englishman's natural longing to be able to shoot back, but he recognised that, trying as it was, the president's strategy was the best. About ten more minutes passed, during which the *Vlodoya* drew up closer and closer, until Chrysie, after a good look through her glasses, was able to say:

"Why, yes; there's the count and Sophie on the bridge. Poppa, why don't you let 'em have just one little hint that we're not quite harmless?"

The last word had scarcely left her lips before another puff of steamy smoke rose from the fore-quarter of the Russian yacht, and a second or so after, a bright flash of flame blazed out, about fifty yards on the port side of the *Nadine*.

"That's a time shell," said Vernon. "They evidently mean business: I fancy they could hit us if they liked. Don't you think, Mr Vandel, that we might slow round and give them one from that gun of yours?"

"No, sir," said the president, looking up from his gun: "not till we've the legs on her. When Mr M'Niven——"

At this moment the chief came up on to the bridge, black and grimed from head to foot.

"All right, Mr Vernon, you can go full steam ahead now. We've got every bit of grit out, and she'll work as easy as ever she did."

"Then," said the president, "I reckon that's about all that we want. Full steam ahead, if you please, Mr Vernon; you can let her go both engines."

The chief officer pulled the telegraph handle over

to full speed. The next moment two columns of boiling foam leapt out from under the *Nadine's* counters as she sprang forward from eight knots to sixteen, and then to twenty. Almost at the same instant the Maxim-Nordenfeldt from the *Vlodoya* forecastle spoke again, and a seven-pound shell, aimed low this time, came hurtling across the water, and missed the *Nadine's* stern by about ten yards.

"I reckon that means business," said the president. "Full speed ahead, if you please, Mr Vernon, and hard aport."

The *Nadine* made a splendid swerve through an arc of about a hundred and eighty degrees, and then began the naval duel, on the issue of which the future course of human history was to depend.

The *Vlodoya* fired three more shots in as many minutes, but they went wide, for she was steaming nearly seventeen knots and the *Nadine* twenty. Then as the *Nadine* swung round so that her bow pointed towards the *Vlodoya*, the president signed to the two men who were working the gun, a wheel was whirled round, and the muzzle swung slowly until he put his hand up and said:

"Stop her, if you please, Mr Vernon, and screw her round as hard as you can."

The engine telegraph rang, a sharp shudder ran through the fabric of the *Nadine*, the water which had been swirling astern mounted up ahead as her engines backed, and her bow came up, till the president raised his hand again to stop her. At the same moment another shell from the *Vlodoya* whistled over the deck at an elevation of only a few feet. In fact, it passed so near to Miss Chrysie

that she involuntarily put her hand up to keep her hat on her head. Clifford Vandel saw it. He didn't say anything, but he set his teeth, squinted along the sights of his gun, and touched a button in the breech. Five seconds later a mountain of boiling foam rose up under the stern of the *Vlodoya*. She stopped like a stricken animal, and lay motionless on the water, lurching slowly down by the stern.

"Well hit, poppa!" cried Miss Chrysie, from the bridge. "I guess that's got him on a tender spot. The count won't have much screws to work with after that. Oh, they're going to shoot again. Suppose you gave them one forward this time."

While she was speaking, the quick-firer had already been reloaded, the president moved the long barrel a couple of degrees, and touched the button again. The sharp hiss of the released air was followed by an intensely brilliant flash of light on the forecastle of the *Vlodoya*, and when the smoke had cleared away the Maxim-Nordenfeldt had vanished.

"I guess there's not much wrong with that automatic sighting arrangement of mine," said the president; "hits every time."

"Couldn't be better, poppa! I reckon they're pretty tired by this. Suppose Mr Vernon gives her full speed again, and we go along and have a talk with Ma'm'selle Sophie and the count. Shouldn't wonder if they knew by now that we've raised their bluff, and are ready to see them for all they've got."

The president re-charged his gun, and then, leaning his back up against the bridge, said:

"Well, yes, Chrysie, I think we can see them now,

if Mr Vernon will give us full speed ahead for a few minutes."

The chief officer nodded, and pulled the handle of the telegraph over. The answering tinkle came back from the engine-room, in which the chief had retired after he had given his message, and the *Nadine* again sprang forward towards the crippled vessel that was now her prey. She described another magnificent curve, and as she rushed up alongside the Russian yacht at a distance of about two hundred yards, Miss Chrysie sat herself down on a camp-stool behind the Maxim, and sent half-a-dozen shots rattling through the rigging of the *Vlodoya*. Then, as the *Nadine* swung in closer, she depressed the barrel of the gun on to the bridge, on which she could now recognise the count and his daughter, and sang out, in a clear soprano:

"Hands up, please, or I'll shoot. My dear Countess Sophie, I never expected this of you."

Countess Sophie looked at her father, and bit a Russian curse in two between her tightly-clenched teeth, and said to her father who was standing beside her on the bridge:

"She has failed—she and the engineer too—and these accursed Americans have done it, I suppose. They have broken our propellers and disabled our gun. What are we to do? It is exasperating, just when we thought that everything was going so well. What has happened to Adelaide?—has she turned traitor too? Surely that would be impossible."

"Impossible or not, my dear Sophie," replied the count, "there is now no choice between sinking and

surrender. You see, that gun, one of these diabolical American inventions, I have no doubt, would sink us like a shot, and then——"

"And then we shall have to surrender, I suppose," said Sophie. "But it is still possible that I shall have a chance to shoot that American girl before this little international comedy is played out, and if I do——"

"Hands up, please, everyone on board, or I *will* shoot this time," came in clear tones across about fifty yards of water. Sophie looked round and saw Miss Chrysie looking along the sights of the Maxim, with her hand on the spring. Her face was hard set, and her eyes were burning. There was no mistaking her intention. In another moment a storm of bullets would be raining along the decks of the *Vlodoya*.

"We are beaten, papa, for the present," she said, as she got up from her chair, and put her hands over her head. The count looked at the grinning muzzle of the Maxim and did the same.

"Yes," he said, "we are beaten this time, and it is hardly good policy to be sunk in the middle of the Atlantic. Later on, perhaps, we may retrieve something; but it is strange how these Anglo-Saxons, stupid and all as they are to begin with, always seem to get the best of us at the end. Yes; we must surrender or sink, and, personally, I have no taste for the bottom of the Atlantic at present.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE *Nadine* ranged alongside, Miss Chrysie still sitting at her Maxim, with Robertson beside her ready to see to the ammunition feed, and the president, leaning over the forward rail, said, as laconically as though he had been putting the most ordinary business proposition:

"Good-morning, excellency; I guess you and the countess had better come on board as soon as possible. If you'll lower the gangway I'll send a boat; but if there's any more shooting I shall sink you. I don't want to do anything unpleasant, you understand; but that high-toned friend of yours the marquise has half-poisoned most of us, and so the rest have to take charge. Are you badly hurt?"

Count Valdemar held a hurried consultation with the captain of the *Vlodoya*, and replied, as politely as he could:

"The fortune of war is with you, Mr Vandel, and there is no need for any further concealment. We are crippled, but the watertight compartments have been closed and we shall float. Meanwhile, we are helpless and entirely at your service. What do you wish us to do?"

In the meantime the *Nadine's* boat had been lowered, and was pulling round her stern to the gangway of the *Vlodoya*, which had been lowered, and the president replied:

"We'll have to ask your excellency and the countess to be our guests for a bit; so if you'll just come right on board and tell your people to get your baggage fixed up, we'll be able to save you a certain amount of unpleasantness. You will be a lot more comfortable on board here than you will there, because we're going to take what coal you've got and then sink you."

As the president said this the captain of the Russian yacht nodded towards a man standing by one of the one-pounders on the fore deck. He pulled the lanyard, there was a sharp bang, and a shell bored its way through the plates of the *Nadine* amidships, just missing the engines. The next moment Miss Chrysie's Maxim began to thud, spitting flame and smoke and lead, sweeping the decks of the *Vlodoya* from stem to stern. Only those on the bridge were spared. For a full three minutes the deadly hail continued, and there was not a man on deck who was not killed or maimed. The president had jumped back to the breech of his gun, the muzzle swung round till it bore directly on the part of the *Vlodoya* which contained her boilers. He held up his hand and Chrysie stopped the Maxim. Then she swung it on to the bridge, glanced along the sights and touched the spring. There was a crack and a puff of smoke and flame, and the captain of the *Vlodoya*, who was standing about a couple of feet away from Count Valdemar and Sophie, reeled half round and dropped with a bullet through his heart.

"I guess your excellency and the countess had better come on board right away," said the president,

still looking along the sights of his gun. "That's a pretty unhealthy place you're in, and my daughter's only got the patience of an ordinary woman, you know."

Sophie looked across at the *Nadine's* bridge, and saw Chrysie's white face and burning eyes looking over the barrel of the Maxim. Her thumb was on the spring and there was death in her eyes. She took her father by the arm, and said:

"Come, papa, it's no use. That she-devil will shoot us like dogs if we don't go. Come."

And so they went down to the deck, strewn with corpses and splashed with blood, to the gangway ladder, at the bottom of which the *Nadine's* boat was waiting.

Miss Chrysie at once left the gun with which she had done such terrible execution, and went with the chief officer to receive them. To the utter astonishment of both the count and Sophie, she held out her hand as cordially as though the meeting had taken place on the terrace of Orrel Court, and said with a somewhat exaggerated drawl:

"Well, countess, and your excellency, I am real glad to see you. We sort of thought we should meet you somewhere about here, and I am sure his lordship and the viscount and Lady Olive, when they get better, will do all they can to make you comfortable. Now, here's the stewardess. As she didn't have any of the marquise's punch last night, she's ready to show you to your room. Mr Vernon, perhaps you'll be kind enough to attend to his excellency. Good-bye for the present: I guess we shall meet at lunch."

"Really, after the unpleasantness that has happened," said the count, "your kindness, and your hospitality are quite overwhelming."

"And," added Sophie, as the two prisoners of war passed into the charge of their respective custodians, "I must say that to me it is as mysterious as it is charming. If the conditions had been reversed, I should certainly have shot you."

"It wouldn't have been quite fair," replied Miss Chrysie, sweetly. "You see I had a gun, and you hadn't."

She watched them disappear down the companion way to the saloon, then she put her hands up to her eyes, groped her way half-blindly to a long wicker chair, dropped into it and incontinently fainted.

Just then the chief, washed, shaved, new-clad and thoroughly contented with the really splendid piece of work that had been done on one of his beloved engines, came on deck, looking as though nothing very particular had happened. He saw instantly what was the matter.

"The lassie has a wonderful nerve," he said to himself. "Ay, what a man she'd have made! But she's only a lassie after all, and we'd better get her below. I'll just take her down to Mrs Evans without troubling the president. He's got plenty to think about. Yes; Vernon's on the bridge, and he'll see to things."

Then he picked her up in his arms and carried her down to her own cabin and laid her in her berth, and gave her into the charge of the stewardess. Then he went up to the captain's room, and found him just recovering consciousness.

"What's the matter, M'Niven?" he said. "That infernal punch last night seems to have poisoned me. I seem to have been having nightmare after nightmare, with guns firing and——"

"That's all right, captain," replied the Scotsman; "if you'd taken less of that infernal punch and more honest whisky, as I did, you wouldn't have such an awful head on you as I suppose you have. Still, there's nothing much to trouble about. We've got the engine to rights again; we've met the Russian yacht, and fought her, and beaten her. Mr Vandel smashed her up with his gun, and Miss Vandel—a wonderful girl that, sir, a wonderful girl—she sat at her Maxim as if it had been a sewing-machine, and seemed to think no more of shots than stitches, and then, woman-like, she fainted, and I've just taken her below and handed her over to Mrs Evans.

"And now, captain, don't you think that a wee peg would do you good? Mr Vernon's on the bridge, the president's holding up the Russians with his gun, and the engines are working all right, but half the crew and all the company are still something like dead, with that Frenchwoman's drugs, whatever they were."

Captain Burgess took the chief engineer's hint, and a stiff brandy and soda. Then he dressed and went on deck, and had a brief conversation with the president, after which he took charge of the operations of clearing all the coal and stores out of the *Vlodoya* before she was sent to the bottom.

The president and Miss Chrysie had to entertain their involuntary guests at lunch, for although the rest of the *Nadine's* company were recovering con-

sciousness, they were still under the doctor's care and unable to leave their berths; but at dinner that evening Lady Olive, the earl, and Hardress were able to welcome them, and they did so with a sardonic cordiality which compelled both his excellency and Sophie to admit that these Anglo-Saxons were, after all, not such bad diplomatists as Europeans were wont to think. Madame de Bourbon was still prostrate, and the marquise had the best of reasons for remaining in her own cabin.

It was perhaps as strange a dinner party as ever sat down afloat or ashore, and it was rendered doubly strange by the fact that the last time they had all sat together most of them suspected, and some of them knew, that this very conflict, which had ended in spite of all disadvantages so completely in favour of the *Nadine* and her company, was certain to take place, yet very few references were made to the state of active hostilities which had now been practically proclaimed.

Count Valdemar and Sophie were treated on board the *Nadine* exactly as they had been at Orrel Court. Lord Orrel and Lady Olive were just as they had been at Cowes, and in the Solent. Hardress, who had taken a somewhat perilously large dose of the fair Adelaide's punch, looked pale and seemed rather sleepy, until he had had two or three glasses of champagne, and then he seemed to brighten up, and began discussing international politics with a frankness and an intimate knowledge which simply astounded their involuntary guests. So far as the party was concerned, there was now no further need for anything like concealment, and not only were

the Storage Works discussed, in their full nature and purpose, but even the advent of the French and Russian expeditions at Boothia Land was anticipated with what the Count afterwards described to Sophie as brutally disgusting frankness.

Miss Chrysie, eating her strawberries at dessert as daintily as though her hands had never been within a mile of a Maxim gun, chatted and chaffed just as she had been wont to do at Orrel Court, and the president talked gunnery and machinery with the captain and Mr M'Niven, who had been invited to join the party; and finally, when even the marquise came into dessert on Lady Olive's pressing invitation, all that she heard about her deliberate attempt to drug the whole ship's company was from Lord Orrel, who rose as she entered, and said in just such a tone as he might have used in the drawing-room at Orrel Court:

"My dear marquise, I am delighted to see that you have recovered from the same mysterious indisposition that has affected all of us. I am really afraid that there must have been something wrong with the recipe for the punch *à le Grand Monarque*, or perhaps it was not intended for general use. However, as we are all happily recovered, we need not trouble ourselves any further about that."

Adelaide entered instantly into the spirit of the comedy that was being played, and she replied:

"Ah, my lord, it is so kind of you not to blame me! Believe me, I am desolated, and have been very nearly killed, and my poor aunt believes too that she is going to die. It is my last performance at punch-making, for I have torn the horrible recipe up and thrown it into the sea."

"I am rather sorry to hear that, marquise," said Hardress, looking at her with a cold, steady stare, which at once enraged and infinitely saddened her; for it proved that the empire, which until a few hours ago she had hoped to gain over him, and through him the world, was now only a dream never to be realised. Still, she kept herself under command marvellously, and greeted the count and Sophie just as though the *Nadine* had been lying off Cowes instead of being lashed to the *Vlodoya* in mid-Atlantic, with the steam winches rattling and roaring over their heads, emptying the Russian yacht's bunkers into the *Nadine's* as fast as her own crew and what was left of her enemy's could do it. In short, a most unexpectedly pleasant evening was spent by everybody.

Coffee and cigars and cigarettes were taken up into the smoking-room, which was well to windward of the coal dust. Adelaide went to the piano and played brilliantly. Then she accompanied Sophie in quaint and tenderly-touching Russian folk-songs. Then Miss Chrysie sang coon songs and accompanied herself; and Hardress, on her suggestion, made with a wicked humour in her dancing eyes, recite Kipling's "Rhyme of the Three Sealers" to her own piano accompaniment. They both did it very well, and more than one person in the cosy little smoking-room could have killed them for it.

Nothing occurred to give the count and Sophie or Adelaide and the innocent Madame de Bourbon any idea that they were really prisoners until they retired for the night. Then the chief steward knocked at the count's door and asked if he wanted

anything more. Mrs Evans did the same for Sophie and the marquise, and then the doors of the staterooms were locked. They were unlocked again at seven the next morning, and, after baths and early coffee, Hardress invited his guests on to the bridge to watch the end of the *Vlodoya*.

During the night she had been completely stripped of everything that could be useful to her captor. Every pound of coal was taken out of her bunkers. The two little quick-firers had been transferred with all their ammunition to the *Nadine*. Her four boats, amply provisioned and watered, were comfortably filled with such of her officers and crew as Chrysie's Maxim volley had left alive. There was a southward breeze, and in forty-eight hours at the outside they were certain to be picked up, either by a liner or a cargo boat, and plenty of money had been given them to pay their passages either to Europe or America. When they had hoisted their sails and began to bear away towards the steamer-track, the *Nadine* cast off from the *Vlodoya*, her screws began to revolve, and the president got his gun loaded.

"I reckon we might have a little gun practice, and see how far this pea-shooter really will carry," he said, looking up at the bridge, with a smile in which neither Sophie nor her father found very much humour. "Will you make it five miles, captain?"

The captain rang for full speed.

The *Nadine* sprang forward with a readiness which showed how utterly futile the plot to cripple her had been, and in a few minutes the motionless hull of the *Vlodoya* was a white speck on the water. Then she stopped and swung round. The president adjusted

his automatic sights, waited till she rose on the swell, and let go. There was a hiss and a whizz, and then, where the speck was a bright flash blazed out. Two more shells followed in quick succession, and as the last flash blazed out, Count Valdemar took his glasses down from his eyes and looked at Hardress, and said, with a touch of bitterness in his tone:

"She has gone! That is a wonderful gun, viscount."

"Yes," replied Hardress, dryly. "That is a twelve-pounder. We have some hundred-pounders at the works, as well as a new weapon which may interest your excellency very much. It destroys without striking. If the French and Russian North Polar Expedition should chance to pay us a visit, you may perhaps see them both in action."

"And now, president," he went on, "I suppose we may as well shape our course for Boothia Land."

"There is nothing more to wait for that I know of, viscount," he replied. And so the *Nadine's* head was swung round to the north-west, her engines were put to their full power, and so she began her voyage to that desolate spot of earth which was soon to become the seat of the world-empire.

CHAPTER XXIV

WITHIN ten days of the sinking of the *Vlodoya* Europe was electrified by the news, published far and wide through the English and Continental press, of what amounted to a pitched battle between two armed private yachts in mid-Atlantic. As may well be imagined, the strange narrative of the officers and sailors of the *Vlodoya* lost nothing either in the telling to the interviewers or in the reproduction in the newspapers.

The boats' crews had been picked up, about thirty-six hours after the sinking of the Russian yacht, by a French liner, which took them to le Havre. The officers had taken the greatest precautions to prevent the men from speaking too freely, but it was no use. There were two journalists, one an Englishman and the other an American, on board the boat, and they agreed to divide the sensation between themselves and their two countries. Both were in the service of wealthy journals, and they bribed as freely as they did unscrupulously, with the result that, in addition to the general gossip of the ship, which was more or less accurate, they each possessed a fairly comprehensive narrative of what had happened on the high seas between the *Nadine* and the *Vlodoya*, both of which were speeding over the wires to America and Canada within half-an-hour of the liner's arrival at le Havre.

But the Englishman did even better than this, for he practically kidnapped the third engineer of the *Vlodoya*, who could speak very good French, chartered a special steamer to Southampton, pumped him absolutely dry on the passage, and turned up at midnight at the office of his paper with a column and a half of vividly-written description of the most sensational event that had taken place on the high seas since the affair of the *Trent* during the American war.

The presses were stopped, the matter was set up with lightning speed, and by the next morning that journalist had achieved the biggest scoop of the twentieth century. The news agencies immediately wired extracts all over the Continent, and meanwhile the news had been leaking out through other sources in France, for passengers will talk, and the captain was bound to make his formal report as to the picking up of the castaways; wherefore, within twenty-four hours the whole Continental press was teeming with interviews, more or less authentic, leading articles, and notes on the subject of this astounding occurrence. Two Russian newspapers published a few meagre details, and were promptly suppressed.

The *Globe*, in a leader on what it termed the "astonishing intelligence published by a morning contemporary," put the matter very concisely, and with its usual clearness and insight into foreign affairs.

"We have here," said the writer, "not only one of the most astonishing, but one of the most significant incidents of modern times—an incident which,

almost incredible as it is, is nevertheless the more significant when taken in conjunction with other contemporary events, of which our readers have been kept constantly informed. It is not customary for either Russian or English private yachts to carry guns, and it is somewhat unusual for a Russian yacht, owned by a well-known Russian ex-Minister of State, to start, as we know the *Vlodoya* did, from Southampton on a cruise to the Baltic, stop at Cherbourg, and then turn up in the middle of the Atlantic. But what is the world to think when this yacht, the property of a nobleman high in favour at the Court of St Petersburg, deliberately opens fire on a yacht owned by an English nobleman, whose guest the owner of the *Vlodoya* had been but a few days before? Perhaps even more amazing is the fact that the English yacht replied in kind; crippled her opponent, took the owner and his daughter prisoners, set the crew adrift, sank her adversary, and vanished. Viscount Branston's yacht was, we understand, bound for Halifax, with two distinguished French ladies on board. A cable just to hand informs us that nothing has been heard of her, although she should have arrived there nearly a week ago. With some reluctance we feel compelled to ask whether there is any connection between this extraordinary occurrence and the mysterious electrical works which, as is well known, are being constructed, at enormous expense, by a syndicate of which both Viscount Branston and his father, the Earl of Orrel, are prominent members. There have been many strange and wild rumours current about this enterprise within the last few

months, and we confess that this almost incredible incident appears to lend some countenance to them.

"In the same connection, it is necessary to call attention to the fact that, just as this enterprise was approaching completion, France and Russia both equipped a so-called scientific expedition for the purpose of once more attempting to force a passage to the North Pole. We do not profess to have any inside knowledge as to these mysterious proceedings, but we confess that we should not be greatly surprised if it would not be more correct to read 'magnetic pole' for 'north pole.' It is impossible to see anything other than an international significance. Noblemen of different nationalities do not nowadays go out on to the high seas to fight naval duels to arrange their private differences; wherefore it appears that either the *Vlodoya* was a common pirate outside the law of nations, and yet owned by a Russian ex-Minister, who was on board when the act of piracy was committed, or she was a privateer acting under the licence of the Russian Government. We, in common with the whole civilised world, shall await with the utmost anxiety the immediate development of this wholly unparalleled state of affairs."

The world waited for about a week, and heard nothing. The British Foreign Office made its usual timid and tentative representation, and received the usual snub, to the effect that the Russian Government was investigating the matter as fully as possible, but had so far only arrived at the fact that the English yacht fired first.

But the plots and counterplots and the steady

preparations which had been going on for the working out or the defeating of the great scheme were now about to bear fruit, and the world was not to be lacking in sensations such as it had never experienced before.

No sooner did the German Government learn the story of the duel between the *Nadine* and the *Vlodoya* than its secret agents began to put two and two together, and make their representations accordingly. Ex-Captain Victor Fargeau was known to have been an intimate friend of Adelaide de Condé, who was a guest on board the *Nadine*, and, further, to have been in close communication with Count Valdemar, the owner of the *Vlodoya*. He had left his country, taken up his residence in Paris, and had been proved to be in close touch with General Ducros. All this was significant enough, but when the cleverest of all the German agents in Paris found out that ex-Captain Victor Fargeau, late of the German Army, had been appointed to the scientific command of the French Polar Expedition, darkness became light, and a peremptory demand was sent from Berlin to Paris for his immediate extradition on the previous charge of high treason.

To this Paris returned a polite but uncompromising refusal, and Berlin promptly said that if the expedition sailed with ex-Captain Fargeau on board, a German squadron would stop it and take him off. To this France replied by mobilising the Northern Squadron and ordering the Admiral in command to escort the expedition to sea and protect it against assault at all hazards. Paris also sent Berlin a curt Note intimating that if the threat

were carried out it would be taken as a declaration of war.

Another Note arrived at Berlin about the same time from Petersburg, informing the German Kaiser that these French and Russian Polar Expeditions formed a joint enterprise on the part of the two countries, and that any act hostile to the one would be considered hostile to the other. The Note also plainly hinted that, considering the tremendous nature of the issues involved by a breach of the international peace, such a trivial matter as the extradition of a person accused of treason could not possibly under the circumstances afford a valid reason for what would be to all intents and purposes an act of war.

Within twenty-four hours a powerful French squadron was manœuvring off the mouth of the Kiel Canal, just out of range of the forts; the French Polar Expedition, with Victor Fargeau on board, was making its way at full speed down the English Channel; the Russian expedition, headed by the *Ivan the Terrible*, passed the North Cape on its way to the coast of Greenland; and four millions of Russians and Frenchmen of all arms were massed on the eastern and western frontier of Germany. At the same moment Kaiser Wilhelm called upon his brother sovereigns of Austria and Italy, and the Triple Alliance stood to arms by land and sea. In a word, the European powder-magazine was lying wide open, and the firing of a single shot would have turned it into a volcano.

Still the weeks dragged on, till the tension became almost unendurable. According to an old North

of England saying, "One was afraid and t'other daren't start," the risks were so colossal.

Great Britain meanwhile kept her own counsel, and went on sweeping up the remnant of the rebel Boers in South Africa. The only precaution she had taken was to place every effective ship in the Navy in commission.

It was at this juncture that Europe experienced a new sensation. In one memorable week English, American, French, German, Austrian, and Italian liners from American ports brought packages of the strangest proclamation that ever was issued, and in the mail-bags of the same boats there were similar communications addressed to all the Chancelleries of Europe, and these were of a character to shake the official mind to its very foundations, as in fact they ultimately did.

The communications, both public and private, took the form of a modest circular dated from the offices of the International Electrical Power and Storage Trust, Buffalo, N.Y. Those which were addressed to the crowned heads of Europe were accompanied by autograph letters respectfully requesting the personal attention of the monarch to the contents of the circular. The circular ran as follows:—

The Secretary of the International Electrical Power and Storage Trust is directed by his Board of Managers to inform the ruling sovereigns and peoples of Europe of the following facts, and to request their most serious attention to the same:—

A. The Directors of the Trust view with great

concern the formidable military and naval preparations which have lately been made by the Powers of Europe. In their opinion, these preparations point to a near outbreak of hostilities on such an immense scale that not only must a vast expenditure of blood and money be inevitable, but the commerce of the world will be most injuriously affected.

B. This Trust is a business concern. Its Directors have no international sympathies whatever, and they don't want war. At the same time, if the Powers of Europe are determined to fight, the Trust will permit them to do so on payment of a capitation fee of the equivalent in the money of each respective country of one dollar per head of effective fighting men in the field per week—fees to be paid into the Bank of England within seven days after the commencement of hostilities. A liberal allowance will be made for killed and wounded if official returns are promptly sent to the London office of the Trust, 56*b* Old Broad Street, London, E.C.

C. Prompt attention to the foregoing paragraphs is earnestly requested for the following reasons:—(1) The Trust has acquired control of the electrical forces of the Northern Hemisphere, and is, therefore, in a position to make all the operations of civilised life, including warfare, possible or impossible, as its commercial arrangements may demand. (2) One week from the date above will be given for the Powers of Europe to settle their

differences without fighting or to accede to the terms offered by the Trust. Failing this, the Northern Hemisphere, with certain exceptions, will be deprived of its electrical force. The consequences of this will be that cables and telegraphs will cease to work, and all machinery constructed of iron or steel will break down if operated. Railroads will become useless, and bridges of metallic construction will collapse as soon as any considerable weight is placed upon them.

D. Finally, I am directed to state that, in addition to these results, it is unhappily probable that the withdrawal of electrical force will very seriously affect the health of the populations of the Northern Hemisphere. Death-rates will very largely increase, and it is probable that a new disease unknown to medical science will make its appearance. It is expected to be fatal in every case, if the terms of the Trust are not complied with, but it will first affect the young and the weakly. It is, therefore, to be hoped that considerations of humanity, if not of policy, will induce the peoples and the Governments of Europe to accede without delay to the conditions which I have the honour to submit.

As may well be imagined, this seemingly preposterous circular was received either with derision or contemptuous silence in every capital of Europe save Paris. There its import was only too well-

known, but at the same time it was impossible for France alone among the nations to acknowledge herself the vassal of the Trust. In Petersburg something of the truth was known; but the Government, confident of the success of the two expeditions, just dropped the communication into the official waste-paper basket and went on with its naval and military preparations.

Everything depended upon the six vessels which were steaming towards Boothia Land reaching their goal and accomplishing their mission. If they succeeded, Europe would be plunged into the bloodiest war that had been fought since the days of Napoleon. If they failed, the war would be stopped by an invisible, but irresistible, force, and humanity would be astounded by the accomplishment of such a miracle of science as it had never seen before.

CHAPTER XXV

EVERY day after the issue of the circular the wire which connected the Storage Works with Winnipeg was kept hot with the news of what was going on in the far-away civilised world, but for some time all that was heard in that land of unsetting suns only amounted to this: Everywhere the Press of Europe had received the pronouncement of the Trust with incredulous derision. It had, in fact, provided professional humourists and caricaturists with quite a new field of industry.

The Governments, as had been expected, took not the slightest notice of it, and General Ducros and the French President, who alone knew what a terrible meaning lay in the plain business-like language of the circular, awaited more and more anxiously as the days went by the execution of the dread fiat of the World Masters.

The sinking of the *Vlodoya* and the disappearance of the *Nadine* had convinced the Minister for War and also the Russian Government that the plot to capture the controllers of the Storage Trust had failed, but they could do nothing without admitting that they knew and believed in the power of the Trust to do as it threatened. Moreover, they could not submit to the terms unless all the other Powers did, and they had not even deigned to notice the existence of the Trust. Meanwhile, the prepara-

tions for war went on, and on the day before the expiration of the time given by the general ultimatum to France, the French troops crossed the border at Verdun, Nancy, and Mulhausen, and the Northern Squadron, strongly reinforced, blockaded the mouth of the Elbe and the Kiel Canal. The Russian Baltic Squadron, which had been going through its summer manœuvres, blocked the exits from the inland seas and threatened the northern coast of Germany, while the Russian army was concentrating in enormous numbers at several points along the Polish frontier.

When Austin Vandel took the dispatch containing this last news into the department at the works which was commonly called the board-room, the president passed it to Lord Orrel and Hardress, who were having a smoke and afternoon chat with him, and said:

"Well, I reckon the Powers mean business, and so, as they haven't had the politeness to answer that communication of ours, I reckon it's about time we showed them that we mean it, too. They'll be fighting by this time."

"I suppose so," replied Lord Orrel; "and of course it's no use waiting any longer under the circumstances."

"Not a bit," added Hardress; "in fact, as you know, my idea was to start a fortnight ago. If we'd done that they might have found it a bit difficult even to start."

"But after all, Shafto," said his father, "a fortnight matters nothing to us; and the object-lesson will be very much more striking if we allow hostilities to

get into full swing, and then bring them to a dead stop. Still, we will begin at once, and I propose, president, that when everything is ready your daughter shall do us the honour of starting the engines."

"And if that wants any seconding," added Hardress, "I'll do it."

"I reckon that'll be about the proudest moment of Chrysie's life," laughed the president. "And seeing that our guests have pretty good reason to take an interest in the engines, perhaps it would only be polite to ask them to come and assist at the ceremony."

"Oh, certainly," said Lord Orrel. "There can't be any objection to that. Shafto, suppose you go and invite them. And it wouldn't be a bad idea if we had a little dinner together afterwards, just to celebrate the occasion. You might see Miss Chrysie also and request the honour of her services.

As Hardress left the room the president said to his nephew: "Austin, you can go and wire to our people here and over in England that the experiment begins to-night. Ask them to let us have all the news they can send, and especially to let us know whether any electric disturbances take place in our territories; and you might ask Doctor Lamson to come over for a few minutes."

From this conversation it will be seen that the momentous voyage of the *Nadine* had ended without any further mishap. Davis Straits and the Northern waters had been singularly clear of ice, and she had been able to steer the whole way to Port Adelaide without difficulty. Doctor Lamson had received

them in the midst of his marvellous creation as quietly as though he had been receiving them in his own house at Hampstead. They had all admired and wondered at the sombre magnificence of what was certainly the most extraordinary structure on the face of the globe. But those who are permitted to see them have marvelled still more at the huge engines and the maze of intricately complicated apparatus which the magic of money and science had called into being in the midst of this desolate wilderness.

So far, the involuntary guests of the Trust had not been permitted to see anything more than the outsides of the engine-rooms and the apartments which they occupied. They had been politely but unmistakably given to understand that, after what had happened, it would be necessary to consider them as prisoners. They would be treated with every consideration—in fact, as guests. But at the same time, they would be closely watched, and any attempt to communicate with any officer or workman employed on the Works would be immediately punished by close confinement for all of them. For their part, they had accepted the strange situation with perfect philosophy, and awaited the coming of the expeditions with a great deal more confidence than they would have felt had they known the terrible nature of the defences with which Doctor Lamson had armed this fortress in the wilderness.

Within an hour after the president had pronounced the fiat which was to alter the history of the world, everything was in readiness for the making of the Great Experiment, and, for the first time since

their arrival in Boothia, Count Valdemar, Sophie, and the marquise were admitted into the great engine-rooms which stood in the middle of each side of the quadrangle. They stared in frank astonishment at the colossal machinery, and the count said to the president as they entered No. 1, or the Northern engine-room:

"Our aims may not be the same, but I am compelled to confess that you have wrought a most astounding miracle in the midst of the ghastly desert."

"It's pretty good," he replied; "but, after all, it's just the sort of miracle that dollars and brains can work all the time. This is not the miracle, this is only what is going to work it. The real miracle will be what our friends in Europe see and feel. Well, now, doctor, are we ready?"

"Quite," replied Lamson. "Lady Olive, you will send the signal to the other rooms? A man is stationed in each of them, and if you touch that button when Miss Vandel pulls the lever you will start the other three engines."

Miss Chrysie, looking just a trifle pale and nervous, took hold of the lever and stood ready to perform the most momentous act ever done by the hand of woman. It had been decided to start the engines precisely at six, and the minute hand of the engine-room clock was getting very near the perpendicular.

"It seems a pretty awful thing to do, you know, poppa," she said, "just to pull this thing and set half the world dying."

"No; I think you are wrong there, Chrysie," said

you have pulled that le
be impossible."

"Then," said Miss Cl
on the handle, "I guess I
the clock struck the firs
third she drew the lever

The starting-engine ga
pants. Lady Olive touche
tinkled in the other engine
of the steel giants began
cylinders gasped and hisse
began to move, at first a
then faster and faster, till e
of bright steel. The hiss
the four giants settled dc
work in silence, save for a
was not to cease day or n
had acknowledged their all

"It is very wonderful,
Adelaide to Chrysie as the
it is all true. To think th
your arm should set those
—and such work! to steal

your friends in Europe, marquise," she replied, shortly, but not unkindly; "but, anyhow, they should have taken poppa's terms; and if they will fight, they must pay for the luxury. Anyhow, we'd better not talk about that; it's no use getting unfriendly over subjects we can't agree upon. What do you say, countess?"

"I entirely agree with you," said Sophie, frankly. "You know, Adelaide, that for prisoners of war we are being treated exceedingly well. And for the present, at least, until our hosts are able to terminate their invitation, I think we might be as nearly friends as we can be."

"That's so," said Miss Chrysie, heartily, yet well knowing that they were both awaiting the moment when, as they believed, the arrival of the expeditions would make the present owners of the works prisoners of France and Russia, and that either of them would poison her or put a bullet through her without the slightest hesitation. "Yes; that's so. We've got to live here together for a bit, and I reckon we may as well do it as pleasantly as possible. And now, suppose we go to dinner."

All things considered, the dinner was really a most agreeable function. The principal topic of conversation was, of course, the effect which the starting of the works would produce on the Northern Hemisphere in general and the fleets and armies of Europe in particular. International politics, too, were discussed, not only with freedom, but with a knowledge which would have astonished many a European Minister; but one subject was tabooed by mutual consent, and that was the French and Russian Polar

Expeditions, which, if they were really making for Boothia Land, ought to arrive in about a week's time.

The three involuntary guests knew perfectly well that their hosts were expecting them. Their hosts knew that they knew this, and, therefore, as a matter of politeness and mutual convenience, the words "Polar Expedition" were absolutely banished from their conversation. Meanwhile, Port Adelaide had been fast emptying for the time when the colliers and cargo boats could get back, for the time was limited. Only the *Nadine* and the *Washington*, a passenger boat capable of about sixteen knots, which had brought the staff up from Halifax, were kept, in addition to a couple of steam launches and a powerful tug sheathed and fitted as an icebreaker.

The *Nadine* and the *Washington* constantly patrolled the coast for twenty miles in each direction, on the lookout for the expeditions. Around and inside the works life went on as quietly as though nothing out of the common was happening. The unsetting sun rose and dipped on the southern horizon, and the great engines purred unceasingly, working out the dream of the man whose mangled body lay in a nameless grave on an alien soil.

They had been working for six days when Europe awoke to an uneasy suspicion that, after all, there must have been something in that preposterous circular which the Electrical Power and Storage Trust, of Buffalo, N.Y., had sent out some five weeks before.

On the evening of the fifth day after Miss Chrysie

had pulled the lever over in No. 1 engine-room a series of unaccountable accidents happened in the engine-rooms of the French Northern Squadron, which was blockading the mouth of the Elbe. Do what they would, the engineers could not keep the engines working smoothly. Little accidents kept on happening with such frequency that the efforts of the whole staff could scarcely keep the engines in working order; and about the same time the officers on the bridges, noticed that the compasses were beginning to behave in a most extraordinary fashion. Even when the ships were quite stationary, they wavered two or three degrees on either side of north, and as the night wore on the variation increased.

The next morning there happened what, up to then, was the strangest incident in warfare. The *Charles Martel*, one of the most powerful ironclads in the French fleet, was cruising under easy steam, just out of range of the heavy guns on the canal forts, when the admiral commanding the squadron, who was on the bridge, heard a muffled grinding noise, and felt a shudder run through the vast fabric. The next moment an officer came up from the lower deck, saluted, and gasped:

"Admiral, the port shaft has broken, and we are only going quarter speed!"

He had hardly got the last words out of his mouth before there was another grinding shock, and a dull rattle away down in the vitals of the ship.

"Ah, there is something more!" cried the officer. "They tell me that the engines have been mad all night."

"Go and see what it is," said the admiral; "we must put out to sea with one engine." At that moment the chief engineer came up, looking white and scared, and said, in a low, shaking voice:

"Monsieur, the crank shaft of the starboard engine has splintered as though it had been made of glass. We are disabled!"

"Nom de Dieu!" exclaimed the admiral. "What is that you say?—disabled? and the tide setting in. Then we are lost. A few minutes will take us within range of the guns on the Canal and at Cuxhaven, and in an hour we may be ashore. There is no hope of repairs, I suppose?"

"Impossible, Monsieur l'Amiral. It would take weeks in the best dockyard in France to repair the damage."

"Then," said the admiral, turning to the commander, who was standing beside him, "we must do what we can. We will not be lost for nothing. Let everything be ready to return the fire of the forts as soon as we are within range."

By this time the German officers on the forts had noted with amazement, not unmixed with satisfaction, that some unaccountable accident had happened to the great French battleship. She was not under steam, she was not steering, she was simply drifting in with the tide as helplessly as a barrel. The tide was setting dead in towards the mouth of the Canal, and the commander of the great fort at Brunsbüttel, making certain of her surrender or destruction, ordered three of his heaviest guns, monsters capable of throwing a nine-hundred-pound shell to a distance of nearly fourteen miles, to prepare for action. They were

mounted on disappearing carriages worked by hydraulic machinery.

The guns were already loaded, the mechanism was set in motion, and the giants rose slowly till their muzzles grinned over the glacis of the fort. Then, without any warning, the framework of one of the carriages cracked and splintered in all directions, the huge gun came back with a terrific crash on to the concrete floor of the emplacement, and, to the amazement of officers and gunners, broke into three pieces as if it had been made of glass instead of the finest steel that Krupp could produce.

Officers and men stared at each other in silent amazement. Were even the guns and their machinery affected by this strange languor which had been afflicting both men and animals for the last day or two? Instinctively they drew away from the other gun; but the *Charles Martel* was now well within range, and Colonel Von Altenau saw that it was his duty not to allow her to come any closer. In fact, he was almost surprised to see that she had not already opened fire upon the fort, so he ordered the centre gun to be trained on her and fired.

As the lanyard was pulled, those on board the battleship saw a vivid burst of flame, and the roar of an explosion came dully across the water, but no shell followed it. The admiral immediately came to the conclusion that some accident had happened in the fort, and he ordered his two forward 13-inch guns to send a couple of shells into it. He went into the conning-tower, and as soon as he received the signal that the guns were ready and laid, he pressed the electric button which should have sent

the sparks through the charges. Nothing happened, and the guns remained silent.

Then he called down the speaking-tube connecting the conning-tower with the barbette:

"The wire does not act. Let the guns be fired by hand."

He was obeyed, and the next moment the blast of a frightful explosion shook the whole fabric of the ship. Barbette and guns disappeared in a blinding blaze of flame. The solid steel crumbled to dust, the decks cracked like starred glass in all directions, and some forty brave fellows were blown over the edge of eternity without even knowing what had happened to them. Both guns had burst into thousands of fragments, just as the great German gun in the fort had done, killing every man within twenty yards of it. The guns had, in fact, behaved much as that little square of steel had done when Doctor Emil Fargeau hit it with a wooden mallet.

Thus the first shots of the war had resulted only in the slaying of those who had fired them. As the helpless *Charles Martel* drifted slowly towards the other forts, they attempted to open fire on her, but after two more big guns had blown themselves to atoms, and killed or maimed a hundred men, she was allowed to drift on until she found a resting-place on the Elbe mud.

On the other ships of the French Squadron disaster after disaster had been happening meanwhile. Engine after engine broke down, electric signals, as well as the electrical ammunition lifts, ceased to work. The compass cards swung about as aimlessly as though there was no such thing as

a Magnetic Pole in existence, and as ship after ship became disabled with broken shafts, cracked cylinders, or splintered piston-rods, a score of the finest warships that France had ever put to sea drifted helplessly up with the tide under the eyes of an enemy that could not fire a shot at them.

The commander-in-chief of the Brunsbüttel station telegraphed to his colleague at Kiel to report the unaccountable disaster, but no answer was received. The message was repeated, and a lieutenant came in a few minutes later, clicked his heels together, and said:

"Herr Commandant, it is impossible to communicate with Kiel, the instruments have ceased to work. I have telephoned as well, but the wires are dead."

"But it is ridiculous—unaccountable!" exclaimed the commandant. "We must communicate. Have an engine made ready at once, Lieutenant, and go yourself. I will send a letter."

The lieutenant found a locomotive with steam up. He took the commandant's letter and started. Within fifty yards the engine broke down as completely as the machinery of the *Charles Martel* had done.

CHAPTER XXVI

EIGHT days out of the ten calculated by the president and Doctor Lamson for the progress of the Great Experiment had expired, and Europe presented the extraordinary spectacle of a continent armed to the teeth, possessing the mightiest weapons of destruction that human science and skill could invent and construct—and divided into two hostile camps which were practically unable to hurt each other.

Away in the far northern wilderness the giant engines purred on remorselessly, continually drawing away more and more of the vital earth-spirit from Europe and Asia. In Great Britain and North America nothing had happened, except a succession of abnormally violent thunderstorms, and certain other minor electrical disturbances which were only detected by instruments at the observatories; but all cables had ceased to work, and the only sea communication possible was by means of wooden sailing ships, for every steamer, whether warship, liner, or tramp, broke down when she got about fifteen miles from the English or American coasts. What was happening in the Southern Hemisphere no one knew till long afterwards.

Throughout Europe and Asia a most extraordinary condition of things was coming to pass. What had happened at Kiel happened also at all the great fortresses along the German frontier which were

invested by the French and Russians. Guns of all calibres on both sides burst, killing those who used them, but doing no damage to the enemy. Quick-firing guns jammed or burst and became useless. If a man tried to fire a rifle, the breech-lock blew out and killed or maimed him, until French and Germans, Russians, Austrians, and Italians alike refused to fire a shot, and even on the rare occasions when bodies of men got near enough to each other for a cavalry or bayonet charge, lance-points, sabres, and bayonets cracked and splintered like so many icicles.

By the tenth day every officer and man in Europe had recognised that if the war was to go on at all it would have to be fought out with fists and feet. All modern weapons of warfare had suddenly become useless. Moreover, communication had become so difficult, that the feeding of the vast armies in the field was rapidly approaching impossibility, and the helpless, hostile battalions were beginning to starve in sight of each other. Locomotives broke down or blew up, bridges collapsed under the weight of the trains, and now horses and men had become afflicted with a deadly languor which made severe exertion an impossibility.

From the war lords of the nations to the raw conscripts and the camp-followers it was the same. Neither mind nor body would do its work. The soul of the world was leaving it—drawn out by those remorseless engines into the vast receivers of the Storage Works—and men were beginning to find that without it they could neither think nor work any more than they could fight.

There was not a cable or a telegraph line in Europe or Asia that could be operated, not a stationary or locomotive engine that would work without breaking down or blowing up. Electric lighting and traction had for two or three days been things of the past. Throughout two continents industries and commerce, like war, were at a standstill; a sort of creeping paralysis had spread from the Straits of Dover to the Sea of Japan.

There were no exceptions, from the rulers of the highest civilisations down to the sampan men of Canton and the fur-clad Samoyeds of the northern wilderness. Great fleets and squadrons were either drifting about the ocean or lying helpless on rock or sand or mud-bank, like the silenced forts full of guns and ammunition and yet unable to fire a single shot either in attack or defence.

On the morning of the eleventh day the French President, who had been drawn along the useless railway from Paris to Calais by relays of horses harnessed to a light truck running on wheels of papier-maché, embarked for Dover on board a fishing-lugger. Twelve hours before the German Emperor had sailed from Cuxhaven, which he had reached by rail with infinite difficulty, and after a dozen breakdowns, for Harwich in a fast wood-built schooner-yacht.

During the last four or five days there had been very little communication between the Continent and England. All English steamers, including warships, had been forbidden to pass the three-mile limit. By a happy accident the Channel Fleet and the Home Defence Squadron had anchored in British waters

after the manœuvres just before Miss Chrysie pulled that fatal lever. The Mediterranean Fleet was at Malta, powerless to move an engine or fire a gun. Communication across the narrow seas was still possible by wooden sailing craft, and it was the news which these had brought from England that had induced the Kaiser and the President to go and see the miracle for themselves.

The moment that they set foot on English soil, which they did almost about the same time, the growing lassitude of the last few days vanished.

"These are truly the Fortunate Isles just now," exclaimed the Kaiser, as he drew his first breath of the cool English air. "A few moments and I am a man again. Then that circular which we all laughed at so was true!" he went on, to himself. "Yes, everything seems going on as usual. They seem to be caring as little about the state of Europe as they did about the African war. Why, there's a train running as easily as though the railways of Europe were not strewn with wrecks."

Then he turned to the aide-de-camp who had accompanied him, and said:

"Von Kritzener, see if you can get me a special to London—but no, we had better keep incognito. Be good enough to go and see when there is a fast train to London, and then we will get something to eat."

The Emperor and his aide were both in ordinary yachting costume, and the points of the famous moustache had been drooped downwards. The aide came back to the yacht in a few minutes, saying that there was a fast train to London in forty minutes;

so his majesty dined briefly but well at the Great Eastern Hotel, and presently found himself speeding swiftly and smoothly and with an unwonted sense of security towards London.

The French President experienced practically the same sensations when he landed at Dover and took the train to Charing Cross. Everything was going on just as usual. They were even doing target practice with the big guns from Dover Castle; and as he heard the boom of the cannon, he thought with a shudder of what had happened only a day or two before to the great French siege-guns before Metz and Strassburg.

All he noticed out of the common was what the Kaiser noticed too—lines of great steel masts along the coast and clumps of them on every elevation inland. From what he had already learnt from General Ducros, he half-guessed that these were the means through which the earth received the vast volumes of electricity given off from the works in Boothia Land, and that it was thus that the magnetic equilibrium was kept undisturbed.

In London nothing seemed altered. Everybody was going about his daily business as though no such continent as Europe existed; so the President and the Kaiser, wondering greatly, both went and put up at Claridge's, and there, to their mutual astonishment, recognised each other. Both were strictly incognito, both recognised that the state of affairs in Europe had reached the limits of the possible, and both guessed that they had come practically on the same errand. Wherefore Kaiser bowed to President and President bowed to Kaiser,

after which they shook hands, took wine together, and, like a couple of good sportsmen, proceeded a little later on to discuss the situation in the Kaiser's private sitting-room.

The result of an interesting and momentous conversation was that the Kaiser sent his aide with an autograph letter to Marlborough House requesting the honour of an interview with King Edward for himself and the President.

The answer was a royal brougham and pair, and a cordial invitation to the two potentates whom fate and the great Storage Trust had brought so strangely together to sleep at Marlborough House.

Nearly the whole of the next day was occupied in interviews between the three rulers, and also with the Ministers of the great Powers who were still in London. The American Minister and the English manager of the Great Storage Trust were present at most of them. At the end of a lengthy discussion on the *status quo*, the Kaiser confessed, in his usual frank, manly fashion, that not only Germany, but Europe, was helpless in face of the invisible but tremendous force which the Trust had shown itself capable of exercising.

"We are beaten," he said, "and it would be only foolishness to hide the fact. Our ships are helpless hulks, most of them wrecks, our trains will not run, our machinery will not work, our guns will not shoot. Within three days we have gone back to the Middle Ages, or beyond them, for, even if we had armour, you could break it with your fist, and you would not even want a mailed one," he added, with a laugh at his own expense.

"There are over ten millions of men carrying arms they cannot use, and hundreds of thousands of these men are starving because the railways are useless and no food can be got to them. It would be absurd were it not so great a tragedy; but since we cannot fight, we must arrange our differences some other way. What do you say, Monsieur le President?"

"I say as your Majesty does," replied Monsieur Loubet, in his blunt, common-sense fashion; "and since these gentlemen of the Trust have shown us how helpless fleets and armies may be rendered, perhaps Europe may be induced to seek for some more reasonable method of arranging disputes than by the shedding of blood."

"I most sincerely hope so," said King Edward; "and if these gentlemen are prepared to endorse these sentiments on behalf of their august masters, I think there will be little difficulty in arranging matters satisfactorily and putting an end to what may be justly described as an intolerable and impossible condition of affairs. What do you say, gentlemen?" he went on, turning to the Ministers.

"I fear, your Majesty, it would be necessary for me to communicate with my imperial master before I could pledge him to any course resembling surrender."

"My dear count," said the Kaiser, turning towards him with a laugh, "I am afraid you hardly realise the position. It would take you at the very least three weeks, possibly six, to reach Petersburg. You forget that all the mechanical triumphs of civilisation are for the present things of the past. There

are no cables, no telegraphs, no railways. Neither horses nor men are capable of any great exertion, and their strength is becoming less every hour. Petersburg is farther from London to-day than Pekin was a month ago."

"And even from Paris," added the President when the Emperor had finished, "I have been four days travelling. I came to Calais in a truck drawn by horses along the railway, and from Calais in a fishing boat. Gentlemen, if I may venture to advise, I would suggest that the best, nay, the only thing that Europe, in your persons, can do, is to place itself in the hands of His Majesty King Edward. We have been enemies, but he is the friend of all of us, and if any man on earth can and will do right it is he."

"I entirely agree with Monsieur le President," said the Kaiser. "We are helpless, and he can help us. For my own part, I place the interests of Germany unreservedly in his hands."

After this it was impossible for the Ministers of the other Powers to hold back, and so a joint-note was drawn up there and then, praying King Edward to accept the office of mediator between the signatory Powers and those uncrowned monarchs who, from their citadel in the midst of the far-off northern wilderness, had proved their title to sovereignty by demonstrating their power to render the nation helpless at their will.

The only communication that was now possible with Canada, and therefore with Boothia Land, was by means of aërographic messages transmitted from one station to another *via* the north of Scotland,

The Faroes, Iceland, Greenland, and Newfoundland, where the cable was working as usual. It took nearly twelve hours for the messages to reach the works, and the president had scarcely communicated its contents to his colleagues when the *Nadine* came rushing full speed into Adelaide Bay with the news that the great Russian ice-breaker, with three other vessels in her wake, was steaming down from the northward about twenty miles away.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE news of the coming of the expeditions was allowed to spread without comment through the works, and, to the intense surprise of the three involuntary guests of the Trust, no apparent precautions were taken to protect the works or the harbour in which the *Nadine* and the *Washington* were now lying against the coming of what everyone knew could be nothing but a hostile force. The two vessels having made their report, filled their bunkers and steamed out of the harbour again to the southward and westward. The great engines purred on, still draining Europe and Asia of their vital essence. An aërograph message was sent to King Edward and the President of the United States. The one to King Edward informed his Majesty that the president and board of trust, while insisting upon the terms of the circular they had addressed to the Powers of Europe, and giving fair warning of what would happen if those terms were ignored, were perfectly content to leave everything else in His Majesty's hands.

The message to the President gave him all the news that there was to give, and informed him that as soon as the King's decision was announced the engines would be stopped, the insulators removed, and the electrical and magnetic currents allowed to flow back over their natural courses, the result

of which would be that, in from twenty-four to thirty-six hours, normal conditions would be re-established, and the business of the world could go on as usual. All fighting, however, save under a war-tax of a dollar per head per week of men engaged in armies and fleets would be prohibited. If this condition, which the London manager of the Trust had been instructed to lay before His Majesty and the foreign Ministers in London, were violated, the engines would be started again, with the same results as before.

It was about eight o'clock in the evening of the same day, to put it in conventional terms, for the long summer twilight of Boothia Land knew no morning and no evening, that the huge shape of the Russian ice-breaker, followed by her three consorts, one a genuine wooden-built exploring ship and the others, to a nautical eye, unmistakably steel cruisers disguised with wooden sheathings, rounded Cape Adelaide into the bay. A couple of miles behind them came the three ships of the French expedition, an antiquated cruiser fitted with the best modern guns, and two obsolete coast-defence ships, slow but strong, and also armed with formidable guns.

"So your friends have come at last," said Miss Chrysie to Adelaide and Sophie as they were taking their evening promenade along one of the broad parapeted walls which formed the quadrangle of the works. "Somehow I always thought it was this pole they were going to look for, not the other one. I reckon they allowed there was a lot more to be found here than up north yonder."

"Of course they did," said Adelaide, with a low laugh that had a wicked ring in it. "There is no need for diplomacy now. Here is the world-throne, the seat of such power as man never wielded before. Here, within these four great walls, are contained the destinies of all the nations on earth. Here is everything; anywhere else nothing. Pah! is it not worth fighting for?"

"My dear marquise," said Sophie, "do you not think that you are letting your feelings run away with you? I grant you they are natural, but——"

"But I guess that's what she means all the same," said Chrysie; "and I don't like her any the less for saying it. Those scientific expeditions of yours have just come out here to take the works by storm, if they can, and run the show on their own. Well, that's war, and we're not going to grumble at it. We've made war on Europe, and Europe's feeling pretty sick over it; but I'll tell you honestly that the sickness of Europe just now isn't a circumstance to what those expeditions are going to experience if they try to rush these works by force, and they won't get them any other way. Well, now I see that some of the people are going down to the steam launch. Shouldn't wonder if Lord Orrel and poppa were sending your friends an invitation to supper, or breakfast, or whatever you'd call it in this everlasting daylight. I reckon that would be quite an interesting little surprise-party, wouldn't it?"

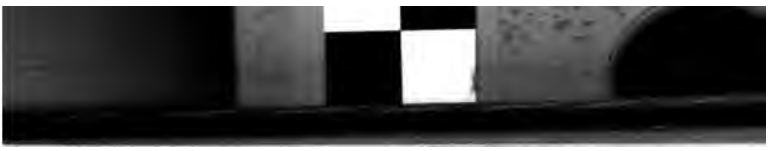
"Delightful!" said Sophie, her quick wits already at work on the problem of how to turn such a surprise-party to the advantage of Russia. After all,

when the supreme moment came, it might be possible. Victor Fargeau would be there on the French expedition, with all the information required to keep the works in operation, or to give the soul which they had stolen from the world back to it. Even at the last moment it was still possible to triumph.

Almost at the same instant similar thoughts were passing through Adelaide's brain. Here were both expeditions. They had arrived at the psychological moment. She knew that the ships were armed with the finest weapons that modern science could create. There were hundreds of trained sailors, gunners, and marines on board. The works were within easy range of the bay, where the Russian ships were even now coming to an anchor. Surely in the face of such a force—a force which could wreck even these tremendous works—the Masters of the World could do nothing but surrender. At the same time, she would have given a good deal to have had in her pocket the dainty little revolver which she knew Miss Chrysie had in hers.

While they were talking, the French expedition, of which one of the ships had broken down and been compelled to refit at Halifax, delaying both expeditions over a week, in addition to the coaling, rounded Cape Adelaide and proceeded to anchor. There were now six armed vessels in the bay, at a distance of about four miles from the works.

A glance through a pair of field-glasses from the walls made it plain that all disguise had now been thrown aside. The joint Polar expeditions were now frankly hostile squadrons. The great ice-breaker mounted two six-inch guns forward, one aft, and six



twelve-pound quick-firers on each broadside. The wooden exploring ship carried no heavy metal, but the disguised cruisers had mounted all their guns; the French vessels, too, frankly bristled with weapons, from guns capable of throwing a 100-lb. shell down to one-pound quick-firers and Maxims. In short, if the works had been a hostile fortress no more unmistakable demonstration could have been made against them by a beleaguering squadron.

But although there was no mistaking the errand of the ships, and though it was plain that they had been expected, the guest-prisoners were astounded to find that, so far as they could see, not the slightest preparations were taken for defence. There was not a gun visible, and everyone, chiefs and workmen, went about their business without the slightest show of concern. The vast quadrangle stood amidst the rocks and sand of the wilderness, dark, silent, and inscrutable, and the huge engines purred on unceasingly, and Austin Vandel sat at his instruments in the telegraph-room, awaiting the word from the King of England, which alone could stop them.

"They are inscrutable, these people," said Sophie to Adelaide when Chrysie had left them on the wall to answer a message from her father. "They know that the guns on those ships could level even these huge walls with the ground in a few hours, wreck their machinery—though our friend Victor would scarcely allow them to do that if he could help it—and bring them to the choice between surrender and death; but here they are, going on with their work as usual, and not even taking any notice of the arrival of the fleet. Mr Vandel told papa that they have

100-lb. dynamite guns, but where are they?—there's not a weapon of any kind to be seen."

"That doesn't say that they are not here, my dear Sophie," replied Adelaide. "In fact, I confess that this very silence and apparent carelessness may hide some terrible possibilities. You know what an easy prey we thought we should find the *Nadine*, and you saw what happened to the *Vlodoya*. Frankly, I tell you I do not think that the success of the expeditions is at all certain. You never know what these diabolical people with their new inventions are going to do next. Look how that hateful American girl has outwitted us all along; and yet she's as friendly as possible all the time."

"Except when she was firing on the *Vlodoya* with that horrible gun of hers," added Sophie. "Don't you wish you had that revolver of hers?"

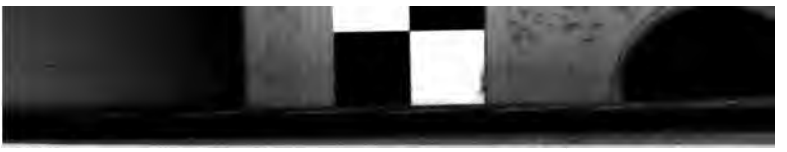
"I would give my soul for it," replied Adelaide, between her clenched teeth.

"And if you had it, what would you do with it?"

"Kill her first, and then him," came from between the marquise's clenched teeth.

"What!" said Sophie, with a vicious little laugh, "kill the man for whose sake you were willing to betray all our plans and perhaps lose us the control of the world? Why, your first condition was that no harm should come to him."

"I had hopes then, I have none now," she replied, in a tone that sounded like a snarl. "He has found me out, and I have lost him; and when you have lost a man, why should he go on living? I have loved him; yes, perhaps I love him still in some strange way; but you are woman enough and Russian



enough, Sophie, to know that I would rather be a mourner at their funeral than a bridesmaid at their wedding."

"My dear Adelaide," said Sophie, slipping her arm through hers, "that is an excellent sentiment excellently expressed. Now I see that you are with us entirely. We are really true allies now, and it rests with us and papa to make the success of the expedition a certainty. Will you promise me that if matters come to an extremity, as they certainly will do in a few hours, you really will shoot Ma'm'selle Chrysie and this absurd Englishman who has preferred an American hoyden to the most beautiful woman in Europe?"

"Yes; if I could, I would do it. I would swear that to you on a crucifix," replied Adelaide de Condé, in a low tone that had a hiss running through it.

"Then come down to my room and I will show you something," said Sophie. "I dare not do it here, for you never know what eyes are watching you."

When they reached Sophie's apartment she put her hand into the side-pocket of a long fur-trimmed cloak that she was wearing, and took out Miss Chrysie's revolver.

"There it is," she said, handing it to the marquise. "You have told me that you are a good shot, so you can use it better that I can. I hope you will use it at the right time and won't miss."

"But how?" exclaimed Adelaide, staring at her in amazement as she put out her hand for the dainty little weapon.

"How!" laughed Sophie. "My dearest Adelaide,

we have to learn many things in such a service as ours. Miss Chrysie did not know that she was walking and talking just now with one of the most expert pickpockets in Europe. Why, I once stole an ambassador's letter-case while I was waltzing with him. He was terribly upset, poor man, and of course I sympathised with him; but it was never found, and the contents proved very useful."

"You are wonderful, Sophie!" exclaimed Adelaide, as she put the revolver into her pocket. "And, of course, all things are fair in love, war, and diplomacy. Well, you have no need to fear that I shall not use this."

At this moment there was a knock at the door, and the count came in.

"Well, papa," said Sophie, "have you any news? What are these people going to do? Have you been able to persuade them to surrender to the expedition?"

"On the contrary, my dear Sophie," he replied, "they are more inexplicable than ever. Would you believe it that Lord Orrel has actually asked me to go down with him to the port and ask the French and Russian leaders of the expedition to dinner, the invitation to include our excellent friend Victor Fargeau?"

"That is only a plot!" exclaimed the marquise; "a shallow plot to get them into the works and make them prisoners. Of course they will not be so idiotic as to come."

"It is difficult," said the count, "to see how they could refuse such a hospitable offer without at once declaring hostilities. We do not know how the

works are defended, or what unknown means of destruction these people may possess, and, to be quite candid, I do not think that our hosts would be guilty of an act of treachery. You know these Anglo-Saxons are always chivalrous to the verge of imbecility. For instance, if the tables had been turned, should we have treated them as they have treated us? I think you will agree with me that we should not. No; I have no fears whatever on that score, and I shall support Lord Orrel's invitation with the most perfect confidence."

CHAPTER XXVIII

LORD ORREL and the count started from the little station just outside the western gate of the works in the private car used by the directors and drawn by a neat little electric engine, which was accustomed to do the four miles in ten minutes.

Meanwhile, Lady Olive had what might, by a stretch of imagination, be called afternoon tea, in that land where it was never quite afternoon or morning, on the western wall looking down towards the harbour. When Miss Chrysie sat down and threw back her afternoon wrap Adelaide and Sophie were disconcerted, if not altogether surprised, to see that she had a light, long-barrelled, wicked-looking pistol hanging by a couple of silver chains from her waist-band.

"My dear Chrysie," said Lady Olive, "what are you carrying that terrible-looking weapon for? You don't expect that you will have to use it, surely," she went on, with just a touch of sarcasm in her tone, "considering what very good friends we have all managed to keep so far?"

"Well, I hope not," said Miss Chrysie, looking round the tables with eyes which had both a laugh and a menace in them. "Of course, it is to be hoped that everything will go off smoothly, but poppa had a friend in the old times who said something that means a lot. He said, 'You don't want

a gun often, but when you do want it you want it badly.' Isn't that so, poppa?"

"Just his words, Chrysie," said the president, "just his words; and he knew what he was talking about when he used them. I never met a man who could hold his temper longer or shoot quicker; and when he used a gun someone usually wanted a funeral pretty soon."

"But surely," said Sophie, "you don't suppose for a moment that our expected guests from the expedition will——"

"I don't know what they'll do, although I think I know what they'll want to do," she replied, quickly. "But somehow I managed to lose my other little pepper-box this morning. Where it's gone to or who's got it I don't know, so I got this instead. It's a pretty thing," she went on, playing with it as a woman might toy with a jewel, "seven-shooter and magazine action. If you hold the trigger back after you've fired the first shot, it shoots the other six in about three seconds."

"A very handy thing in a tight corner, I should say," said Hardress, smiling at her over the top of his tea-cup, "and in such hands I should think a very ugly thing to face."

Adelaide's fingers were itching to take out the revolver and shoot both of them when she saw the all-meaning glance which passed between them while he spoke, but instead of that she raised her tea-cup and touched it with her pretty lips, and as she put the cup down she said, with the sweetest of smiles, to the president:

"I think it is quite charming of you, Mr President,

to ask the leaders of the expedition to dinner in such a friendly way. Surely it is not always usual to ask the enemy within the gates?"

"We have no enemies, marquise," he replied, gravely, "except those who stand in the way of our commercial undertaking, and with them, of course, business is business, and there is no sentiment in that. Of course we have a pretty good idea why these two expeditions have come to the magnetic pole instead of trying to get to the North Pole, but we've not been lying awake at nights worrying about that, and there's no particular reason why we shouldn't ask the scientific explorers to dinner. All the same, if they happen to have come with the idea that they have a better right to these works than we have, and they want any trouble—why, they can have it."

"And," added Hardress, still looking across at Chrysie, "I think they will find it the most extraordinary kind of trouble that mortal man ever ran up against."

"It's to be hoped," said Doctor Lamson, speaking for the first time since the little tea-party had begun, for he had been thinking hard, and every now and then raising his eyes as though to seek inspiration from Lady Olive's calm, patrician face, as calm now, on the eve of a struggle which could scarcely end without bloodshed, and might end in ruin, as it would have been in a London drawing-room—"I most sincerely hope that it will not come to actual hostilities; it would be really too awful."

"I wonder if it would be permissible for a prisoner of war to ask what would be too awful, doctor,"

said Sophie, looking at him with a smile which somehow made him think of a beautiful tigress he had seen in the Thiergarten in Berlin.

"The means that we should be compelled to employ in such a case to reduce those two squadrons, or expeditions, or whatever they call themselves, to something about as unsubstantial as that," replied the doctor, blowing a puff of cigarette smoke into the air.

At this moment Austin Vandel came up on to the wall, and handed a piece of paper to his father.

"Just come through, dad," he said. "I reckon we've frozen that war clean out."

The president opened the paper and read aloud:

"'Powers agree to stop war and settle matters of dispute by arbitration if you will restore electric equilibrium in Europe. Terms between you and Powers to be arranged at a council of Sovereigns and Ministers presided over by myself. If this is satisfactory, please reply, and stop your machinery. Conditions becoming very serious in Europe.—(Signed) Edward R.I.'"

"Well," continued the president, "that means they've climbed down. Doctor, I reckon we can switch off the engines now, couple up the connections, and use the power for something else if it's wanted. What do you think, viscount?"

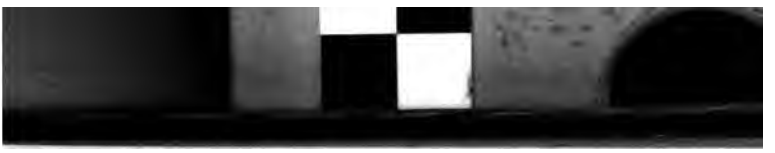
"Certainly," replied Hardress. "If the Powers have accepted King Edward's arbitration we can do nothing else; and, besides, if our not entirely unexpected visitors allow themselves to be tempted to commit any hostile act after that they will place

themselves outside the law of nations, and we shall be at liberty to deal with them as we please."

"That's so," replied the president, looking lazily across the table at Sophie and Adelaide. "Austin, you can go and telegraph to St John's that we put ourselves entirely in King Edward's hands, and that the engines have stopped. They'll have a few thunderstorms most likely, but in twenty-four hours everything will be as it was before. You might also mention that the French and Russian expeditions are here, and that to-night we hope to have the leaders to dinner."

The dinner-party in the board-room of the works to which the guests sat down at 8 P.M. was quite the strangest that had ever been given in the Northern Hemisphere. It was a dinner given by the holders of a citadel which had been proved to be the veritable throne of the world-empire to four men who had come to the wilderness of Boothia Land with the now practically avowed object of taking it from them by force of arms.

For no other possible reason could these two peaceful expeditions have sailed from Riga and le Havre to go to the North Pole, or as near to it as might be, and arrive at the Magnetic Pole, bristling with weapons, and obviously prepared to attack the works, situated as they were on the territory of a friendly nation, as though they were a fortress on hostile soil. Yet Vice-Admiral Alexis Nazanoff, in command of the Russian expedition, came with Professor Josef Karnina in just such friendly style as did Vice-Admiral Dumont and ex-Captain Victor Fargeau, late of the German staff-corps.



They were all far too well versed in the ways of war or diplomacy not to be considerably surprised at the nature of their reception, even as they were at the colossal dimensions of the buildings which at the bidding of the magic of millions had arisen in the midst of this inhospitable wilderness. They had expected a fleet of guardships protecting the entrance to the harbour, and they would not have been surprised if their passage through the narrow Lankester Sound had been prevented by torpedos, or opposed by privateers equipped by the Trust; and for that reason they had mounted their guns and felt their way for days at the rate of two or three knots an hour through the narrow passages which led southward to Port Adelaide, but all they had seen was the fleeting shape of a white-painted yacht, the now world-famous *Nadine*, scouting on the horizon and then vanishing into the grey twilight of the long northern day.

Not only had they been permitted to anchor in the natural harbour which formed the only approach by sea to the works without the slightest notice being taken of them, but, most wonderful of all, Lord Orrel, the English nobleman who was one of the three directors of the Trust, had come down with Count Valdemar, who, with his daughter, had organised the Russian expedition, to invite them to dinner in just as friendly a fashion as they might have done if Boothia Land had been Paris, and the Great Storage Works the Hotel Bristol.

The situation was distinctly mystifying, and therefore not without its elements of uneasiness—even perhaps of something keener, and the uneasiness

and the fear were amply shared by the friends whom they met so unexpectedly within the four walls of the great world-citadel.

But astonishment became wonder when the two admirals, clad in their full-dress uniforms, found themselves and their scientific colleagues ushered into first a luxuriously-appointed reception-room lighted by softly-shaded electric lamps, where the president of the Trust, the multi-millionaire magnate, the king of commerce, who played with millions as boys play with counters, dispensed cocktails from a bar which might have been spirited away from the Waldorf-Astoria, and the men and women, friends and enemies, received them in costumes which might have come straight from Poole's or Worth's.

Then, when the cocktails had been duly concocted and consumed, and Lord Orrel's own butler announced that dinner was served, Lady Olive, as châtelaine of the castle, took the Russian admiral's arm and led the way through the curtained archway into the softly-lighted dining-room, so perfectly appointed that it might well have been spirited from London or Paris or Petersburg to the wilderness of Boothia.

The French admiral followed with Countess Sophie, Count Valdemar with the marquise, and Lord Orrel with Miss Chrysie, the rest of the men bringing up the rear.

The dinner, as Admiral Dumont said afterwards to Admiral Nazanoff, was a gastronomic miracle. Wines, soup, fish, and so on, were perfect; it was a wonder in the wilderness. But even more wonderful still was the conversation which flowed so easily

around the table. No one listening to it would have dreamt that the greatest war of modern times had been brought to a state of utter paralysis by the quiet-spoken men who were so lavishly entertaining enemies who had come to dispossess them of the throne of the world, any more than they would have dreamt that the elements of a possible revolution, greater than any that had yet shaken the foundations of the world, were gathered round that glittering, daintily-adorned dinner-table.

But when Lady Olive rose and led the way back to the drawing-room Lord Orrel began the serious business of the evening by asking Hardress and Doctor Lamson to pass a couple of decanters of '47 port, from the cellars of Orrel Court, to their guests. When the decanters had gone round and the glasses were filled, Lord Orrel raised his own glass, and said:

"Well, gentlemen, the time has come for me to formally and yet not the less cordially bid you welcome to Boothia Land. We understood before we left England that you were bound on a voyage of discovery to the North Pole; to that goal which so many brave men have tried to reach, and which has so far been unattainable."

Then his voice dropped to a sterner tone, and he went on:

"I wish to ask you, on behalf of my colleagues and myself, those who are working with me in the enterprise which you have to-day seen in concrete form, whether your visit is one of peace or war. Those, I am well aware, are grave words to use, yet, under the strange circumstances which have brought us together, I must ask you to believe me

that it is necessary, even inevitable, that they should be used. If you have paid a visit to Boothia Land and the Storage Works only in the interests of science, I can assure you that we and our staff will spare no pains to show you everything that can be seen.

"Considering the slow rate at which you have been compelled by circumstances to travel from Halifax, it may not be within your knowledge that since you left Europe we have happily been able to stop a great European war. We have paralysed the fleets and armies of a continent, and the warships of Europe are now resting motionless in dockyards or lying as wrecks on the sands and rocks of the coasts. The great Powers have, in short, found it impossible to prosecute the war without our consent—for, as a matter of fact, their armies were starving to death in face of each other—and have consented to place their difference in the hands of King Edward. The German Emperor, the President of the French Republic, and the Ministers of all the Powers engaged have assented to this. Here is a transcript of a dispatch received from London to-day, which will, I hope, convince you that the world is, happily, once more at peace. Therefore it is, of course, impossible that your mission can be anything but a peaceful one."

The two admirals and Victor Fargeau had been looking at each other somewhat uneasily while Lord Orrel was speaking. They had no idea of the events which had been taking place in Europe during the last fortnight. What Lord Orrel had said might be true or simply a deliberate attempt to frighten them

out of their purpose; but whether he was telling the truth or not, there were still the sealed orders with which both expeditions had sailed, and obedience is the first duty of a sailor. So when Lord Orrel continued:

"And, that being so, gentlemen, I hope you will be able to join me in a glass of wine and drink to continued peace to Europe, and prosperity to the enterprise which has so far been successfully carried through by those who have the honour to be your hosts to-night."

"My lord," said the Russian admiral, rising to his feet, but not taking his glass, "you have been honest with us, and we—I speak for my colleague, Admiral Dumont, as well—cannot be less than honest with you. It is not necessary for me to remind you that scientific Polar expeditions do not carry such guns as we do—guns which, great and all as these buildings are, could wreck them in a few hours. You have been frank with us, we will be frank with you. We know nothing of this mysterious power by which, as your lordship says, you have stopped the war in Europe. As servants of our countries, we know only the orders we have received, and those are either to compel the surrender of these works into our hands, or destroy them. We accepted your hospitality in the hope that we might be able to make terms for a peaceable surrender."

"And that, sir," said Hardress, starting to his feet, "I may as well tell you at once, is impossible. You can no more take or destroy these works than the European armies could fight each other three days ago. You are our guests now, and therefore

safe from all harm. You are at liberty to rejoin your ships at any time you please. If you choose to leave us in peace and take your way back you may go, and there will be an end of the matter. But it is only my duty to tell you that if a shot is fired with intent to injure any portion of these works, you and your ships will not only be destroyed, you will be annihilated."

CHAPTER XXIX

A DEAD silence of some moments' duration—during which hosts and guests looked at each other as men might before the outburst of a storm—then Victor Fargeau, after an exchange of glances with the French admiral, said, in a voice which trembled with angry emotion:

"Milords, I think I am speaking for my comrades as well as myself if I say that we have come too far to be frightened from the accomplishment of our purpose. For my own part, I may say that nothing, not even the fear of that annihilation which the viscount has just threatened, would turn me from my purpose, because I have come to take back that which is mine and France's. These works may be your property, gentlemen, because you have built them with your money and your labour, but the soul which animates them, which makes them a living organism instead of a lifeless mass of brick and stone, the power which you say has enabled you to paralyse the fleets and armies of Europe, that is mine: for I am the son of the man who created it. He left it to me as his last legacy. I have returned to my allegiance to France after doing her what service I could elsewhere. Though France at first rejected the fruit of my father's genius she has now accepted it, and in our persons

she and her ally are here to demand restitution of that which has been stolen from her."

"I think you can hardly say stolen, Monsieur Fargeau," said Hardress, without rising. "The French Ministry of War very foolishly refused to have anything to do with your father's invention, and he may have given you one set of specifications, but he also threw himself into the sea with the other, and we picked him up. You can call it chance or fate or anything you please, but it certainly wasn't theft. You see, we got this land and built these works while the French Government was thinking about it; and I must also remind you that they are built on British soil, and held under lease from a British Colonial Government.

"Russia, France, and Great Britain are at peace. The war in Europe is over, and therefore you will excuse me if I remind you and your colleagues that any attempt to attain your end by force would put you outside the pale of civilisation. In other words despite your uniforms and your commissions, you would simply be common pirates, with no claim to any of the rights of regular belligerents."

"But," said Victor Fargeau, speaking with a distinct snarl in his voice, "you forget, Monsieur le Vicomte, that we are in a position to compel surrender, and that, once masters of the works, we shall be, as you are, above the law. Granted all you say, it comes to this: Nothing can justify our mission but success, and we shall succeed."

"In that case," said the president, in his somewhat halting French, "it doesn't seem worth while to discuss the matter any further. We won't sur-

render the works, and the last man left alive in them would fire the mines and die in their ruins. These gentlemen think they can take them. We think they can't. It's no use talking about a proposition like that. It's got to be argued with guns and other things. It seems to me that the only question we've got to ask is, whether all these gentlemen are unanimous in their determination to take the works by force, if they can?"

Admiral Dumont exchanged a whispered word with his Russian colleague, and then he rose and said:

"Milords, I regret to say our orders leave us no other alternative, and our duty to our countries will compel us to take that action, most reluctantly as we shall do so. As Monsieur Fargeau has said, we believe that the vital principle of this system belongs to him and to France. We have been sent here to regain what was lost to us through an unfortunate mistake, and we must do so. Yet we do not wish to be precipitate. We will ask you to take until six o'clock to-morrow morning, that is to say, eight hours from now, to reconsider your decision as to surrender. And there is just one more point.

"You have certain guests, not entirely voluntary ones, in the works. If it should, unhappily, come to a struggle between us, it would, of course, be impossible for such chivalrous gentlemen to retain two ladies and a Russian nobleman and ex-Minister. We request that, in the unfortunate case of hostilities becoming inevitable, they shall be permitted to come an board one of our ships."

As the French admiral sat down, Lord Orrel got up and said:

"Gentlemen, I am exceedingly sorry that matters have come to such a pass as this. There can be no question of surrender, but our guests will be free to join your squadrons when they please. Therefore, for their convenience, and in order not to bring our little dinner to too abrupt a close, we will accept the truce till six o'clock. Perhaps by that time other and, I think, better counsels may have prevailed with you.

"I sincerely hope that they will; for I can assure you that my son was not speaking idly when he said that you would not only be destroyed, but annihilated. We have here means of destruction which have never yet been used in war. For your sakes, and for those of the brave men under your command, I trust that they never will be. And now, as further discussion would seem to be unprofitable, suppose we join the ladies. We may be friends, at anyrate, till six o'clock."

In the reception-room the mystified guests of the Trust found coffee and liqueurs, music and song and pleasant conversation, which touched on every possible subject, save battle, murder, and sudden death. Then came a stroll on the walls by the light of a brilliant *Aurora*, which made the sun, which was just touching the southern horizon, look like a pallid and exaggerated moon, and during this stroll Victor Fargeau managed to pass a small Lebel revolver and some cartridges to Sophie and the count in case of accidents. They had decided to go on board the *Ivan the Terrible* when the guests left the works, and Ma'm'selle Felice and the count's servant were already putting their baggage together. The train was to wait for them at midnight.

Meanwhile, Doctor Lamson, who had left the party immediately after dinner, had been getting the defences of the works in order. The huge engines, disconnected now from the absorbers and storage batteries, from which the captured world-soul was now being released back into the earth, were still purring softly, and working as mightily as ever, but now their force was being used to a different end.

On each of the four towers at the corners of the quadrangle there had been mounted an apparatus which looked something like a huge searchlight, and underneath it were two real searchlights. On eight platforms, one on each side of the towers, but hidden by a circular wall of twelve-inch hardened steel, were mounted, on disappearing carriages, the president's big guns, enlarged copies of the one he had used so effectually on board the *Nadine*. Each would throw a shell containing a hundred pounds of Vandelite to a distance of eight miles. The great engines worked continuously, storing up liquid air in chambers under the gun platforms, but they were also doing other and, for the present, much more deadly work. The huge copper tubes above the searchlights on the towers were turned above the harbour. They made neither light nor sound, but all the while they were accumulating destruction such as no mortal hand had yet dealt out to an enemy.

The evening passed, apparently in the most friendly and peaceful fashion, and no one suddenly introduced into the reception-room would have dreamt that the members of Lord Orrel's dinner-party were not on the very best of terms with themselves and

each other. Not even Adelaide or Sophie, sitting there with their revolvers in the pockets of their dinner dresses, and thoughts of murder in their souls, had the remotest idea of how terribly it was destined to end.

Miss Chrysie had sung "The Old Folks at Home," and Adelaide one of the old chansons which had delighted the Grand Monarque in the Trianon. Then Sophie sat down at the piano, and the slow solemn strains of the Russian National Hymn wailed up in majestic chords from the instrument. There was something of defiance both in her touch and in her voice, but international courtesies were respected, and everyone in the room stood up. For Sophie Valdemar it was her swan-song—since she was never to sing another—and she sang it splendidly, with her whole soul in it. As the last line, "Give to us peace in our time, O Lord," left her lips, Lord Orrel went to her side, and said:

"Thank you, countess. A splendid hymn splendidly sung!" And then he turned to the French and Russian admirals, and said: "Gentlemen, is it not possible for you to answer, as you could answer, that prayer for peace? I can assure you, on my word of honour as an English gentleman, that this building in which you are now is impregnable to all forms of attack known to modern warfare. At a distance of five thousand miles we have paralysed the fleets and armies of Europe. Your ships are less than five miles from our walls: you are not courting defeat, you are courting annihilation. Can you not leave us in peace?"

"I was under the impression, milord," said Admiral

Nazanoff, "that that subject was closed for the present. We have yet to be convinced as to these terrible powers which you claim to possess: but our orders are real, so too are our ships and guns; and since you have refused the terms we have offered we have no alternative but to put these boasted powers of yours to the test of war. I regret it most exceedingly, as I am sure my colleague, Admiral Dumont, does also, but that must be our last word."

The French admiral and Victor Fargeau both bowed assent as he spoke. And Lord Orrel answered:

"Well, gentlemen, since you are resolved, so be it. We will not discuss the matter further."

While he was speaking Lady Olive had gone to the piano, and, as he ceased, the opening chords of "Auld Lang Syne," floated through the room, and she began to sing the old Scotch song. The words had a strangely satirical meaning for Count Valdemar and his daughter and Adelaide, who had heard them several times at Orrel Court, and Lady Olive put such expression into them that both Sophie and Adelaide felt inclined to be a little ashamed of themselves. Then in the midst of the song the clock began to chime twelve, and Lady Olive, with a frank look of defiance in her eyes, switched off suddenly into "God Save the King," and began to sing the opening lines. At the end of the first verse she stopped and rose from the piano, and said to her father, who had been looking a little uneasy, as though he thought it was hardly good taste:

"I am very sorry, papa, if I have offended, but really I could not help it; it seemed inevitable."

"And why not?" said Adelaide. "Was not the same song sung in honour of the Grand Monarque by the ladies of Versailles? Well, now, Lady Olive, I suppose it is good-night and good-bye. A thousand thanks for all your kindness and hospitality."

"And a thousand thanks from me, too," said Sophie.

They held out their hands, but Lady Olive put hers behind her, and drew back.

"Thank you," she said, frigidly. "You are quite welcome to any kindness that I have been able to show you; but, really, I must ask you to pardon me if I decline to shake hands with you after you have definitely joined the enemies of my family."

"Perhaps you are right, Lady Olive," laughed Sophie. "Still, I hope that, at no very distant time, we shall have an opportunity of returning some, at least, of your kindness."

A few minutes later hosts and guests were standing outside the western gate, beside which the electric engine and the saloon carriage were waiting to take them to the harbour. The departing guests' luggage had been put on a little truck at the back.

"Ah, well, this is the end, I suppose," said Adelaide to Sophie as they stood in the dim twilight of the Northern midnight, exchanging their last formal salutations. "To-night peace; to-morrow war."

"But why not war now?" whispered Sophie. "Look! what a chance! Shall we ever have another like it? À la guerre; comme à la guerre!"

"Yes," whispered Adelaide in reply. "Ah, sacré! Look there!"

As she spoke, Chrysie left Lady Olive's side, went to Hardress, and slipped her arm through his, and looked up at him with an expression that there was no mistaking.

Then Adelaide de Condé's long pent-up passion broke loose, and the hot blood of hate began to sing in her head and burn in her eyes. Everything, so far, had failed. She had made herself a criminal, and had been punished by a silent, but humiliating, pardon. She had disgraced herself in the eyes of the man she would have sold her soul to get, and now—well, what did it matter? To-morrow—nay, within six hours, it would be war to the death, Why not begin now, as Sophie had whispered?

For the moment she was mad, or she would not have done what she did. But she was mad—mad with failure, hopeless love, and the hatred which only the "woman scorned" can feel. She pulled Chrysie's revolver out of her pocket, and snarled between her teeth:

"You have got him, but you shall not keep him!"

The revolver went up at the same moment, and she pulled the trigger. Three shots cracked in quick succession. Hardress went down with a broken thigh; Chrysie, in the act of drawing her own revolver, received a bullet in her arm, which was intended for her heart; and the third one went through the hood of her cloak, just touching the skin above the ear.

She tried to get out the revolver with her left hand; but, before she could do so, Sophie and Fargeau had opened fire, and at Sophie's first shot, she clasped her hand to her side, and went down

beside Hardress. Lord Orrel had a bit of his left ear snipped off, and the president got a flesh wound just below the left shoulder.

The two admirals, who had already taken their seats in the car, with Madame de Bourbon and the Russian professor, sprang to their feet; but, before they could leave the car, a strange and awful thing happened. A blinding glare of light shone out from the southern tower, where Doctor Lamson had been watching the departure through his night-glasses. The thin ray wavered about until it fell on Sophie Valdemar and Adelaide de Condé, still standing close together, with Victor Fargeau just in front of them.

For a moment their faces showed white and ghastly in the blazing radiance; and then, to the amazement and horror of those who saw the strangest sight that human eye had ever gazed upon, down the ray of light, invisible, but all-destroying, flowed the terrible energy of the disintegrator on the top of the tower. Their hair crinkled up and disappeared, the flesh melted from their faces and hands. For an instant, two of the most beautiful countenances in Europe were transformed into living skulls, which grinned out in unspeakable hideousness. Then their clothing shrivelled up into tinder, and all three dropped together in an indistinguishable heap of crumbling bones.

CHAPTER XXX

ALMOST at the moment that the man and the two women who, but a few moments ago, had been standing in the full pride of their youth and health and beauty, had dropped to the earth in little heaps of crumbling bones, whistles sounded inside the works, and a number of men came out of the western gate, some of them armed with rifles and revolvers, and others carrying stretchers. Hardress and Chrysie were lifted on to two of these, and Lady Olive went back into the works with them.

Lord Orrel and the president, after having their wounds hastily bandaged for the time being, went to the door of the saloon carriage, and Lord Orrel said, shortly and sternly:

"Madame de Bourbon, as you have seen, your niece has ceased to exist. Count Valdemar, the same is true of your daughter. And as for you, gentlemen," he went on, turning to the two admirals, "you have seen something of those means of defence of which I spoke to you after dinner.

"There," he went on, pointing to the little heap of mingled bones lying on the sand, "is the proof of it. Every human thing that tries to pass the limits of those rays will share the same fate. These people were enemies, but they were worse—they were traitors; and, as you have seen, they wished to be murderers. They have justly earned their fate.

There is no reason why you should share it. Take my advice, I pray you, advice which I give from the bottom of my heart. Weigh anchor to-night, go back to Europe, and you will find that everything that we have told you is true."

"That, my Lord Orrel, is impossible," said Admiral Nazanoff, coming to the door of the car. "By what devilish means you have slain Captain Fargeau and those two ladies we know not, save that it must have been done through some material mechanism. To-morrow our guns shall try conclusions with it, whatever it is. Yes, even though you turned that murderous ray on us and killed us, as you did them, for our men have their orders. And now, I suppose, we had better get out and walk. We can hardly expect the use of your train after what has happened."

"You needn't worry about that, admiral," said the president; "we've promised you safe conduct to your ships, and you shall have it. But look here, count," he went on, pulling a heavy six-shooter out of his pocket, "don't you get fingering about that pocket as if you had a gun in it, or it'll be the last shooting-iron you ever did touch. We don't want any more shooting than we've had till we begin business in the morning."

Count Valdemar saw that he was covered, and he didn't like the look of the hard, steady, grey eyes behind the barrel of the long repeating pistol. He took his hand empty out of his pocket, clasped it with the left over his knees, and shrugged his shoulders. There was nothing to be said, and so he kept something of his dignity by holding his tongue, and the president went on:

"Well, that's better. You keep your hands where they are, and no harm will happen to you just now. But don't you think, gentlemen, that it would be better if Madame de Bourbon came back with us into the works, where she will be safe, anyhow safer than she would be on one of your ships, if you are still determined to fight it out."

"I am much obliged to you, Monsieur le President," replied the old lady, in her most autocratic manner; "but after what has happened, and what I have seen, I prefer to return with my own people."

"And," added Admiral Dumont, "you may be quite certain, monsieur, that before this most regrettable battle begins at six o'clock, one of the ships will have taken Madame de Bourbon beyond the reach of harm."

"With that, of course, we must be content," said Lord Orrel, coming back to the president's side. "And now, gentlemen, since, as you say, it is to be war between us, I have one more favour to ask: Here is the man," he went on, pointing to the second engineer of the *Nadine*, who had been brought out of the gate by a couple of stalwart quartermasters, "here is the man who allowed himself to be bribed by the late Countess Sophie Valdemar and the Marquise de Montpensier to wreck the engines of the *Nadine*, and so, as they thought, turn the course of fate in their favour. We have not punished him, but we have no further use for his services. He is a good engineer, whatever else he may be, and so perhaps you will be able to find him some employment on board one of your ships. Now, Robertson and Thompson, help Mr Williams into the car,

please. These gentlemen want to get down to the harbour."

The two quartermasters picked up the handcuffed Williams, and flung him in through the open door of the saloon. Then the president said to the man at the engine, "Right away, driver, and come back when these gentlemen are safe on board. Salud, Señores," he went on to the two admirals, raising his hat with his unwounded arm. "Take my advice —clear out, and don't let us have any shooting in the morning. I reckon we've had quite trouble enough already."

At this moment the driver of the electric motor sounded his bell, the two admirals and the count raised their hats and stared out through the window with grim, immovable faces, and so went back to the ships, marvelling greatly at the wonderful horror they had beheld. Madame de Bourbon was already in hysterics, succoured by Ma'm'selle Felice. Count Valdemar, though stricken to the heart by the frightful fate of the only human being that he had loved since his wife had died nearly twenty years before, was yet determined to use all his influence to compel the admirals to take the amplest possible revenge for her slaying. Certainly if the works were not battered into ruins within twelve hours, it would not be his fault; and then, as the little train drew out, he fell to wondering whether Hardress and Chrysie Vandel were killed or not.

"And are you still decided to fight, gentlemen?" he said to the admirals a few moments later, when the car was rattling over the narrow rails, "and, if so, what are you going to do with this thing?" He

touched Mr Williams's still prostrate body with his toe as he said this.

"I need not tell you, count," replied Admiral Nazanoff, "as a Russian to a Russian, that orders are orders, and mine are to take those works or destroy them. I admit that what we saw to-night was very wonderful and very terrible, but when Holy Russia says 'Go and do,' then we must go and do, or die. The Little Father has no forgiveness for failure. That, in Russia, is the one unpardonable fault. Our guns will open at six in the morning. That man will take his chance with the rest of our men."

"And," said Admiral Dumont, "even if we cannot take the works and use them, we may destroy them, and so rid the world of this detestable commercial tyranny which would make war a matter of poll-tax. We shall open fire at six. Ah, here we are at the wharf. Now let us go and see that everything is ready. Admiral Nazanoff, I believe you are my senior in service; it will therefore be yours to fire the first shot. The *Caiman* shall fire the second."

"And I shall ask you, admiral," said the count to Nazanoff, "as a personal favour, and also, as I will say frankly, a matter of personal vengeance, to be allowed to fire that first gun."

"My dear count," replied the admiral, "with the greatest pleasure. It shall be laid by the best gunner on board the *Ivan*, and your hand shall send the shot, I hope, into the vitals of these accursed works. If we could only manage to drop a hundred-pound melinite shell into the right place, it would do a great deal."

CHAPTER XXXI

UNTIL five o'clock there was silence both in the works and on the ships in the harbour. Then, as the southern sun began to climb on its upward curve, the eight searchlights on the towers blazed out, looking ghostly white in the twilight. They were arranged so that they formed two intersecting triangles on each face of the works.

From the top of the western gate flamed a huge star. It was a ten-million-candle-power light, and its radiance, cast directly upon the harbour, was so intense that while the ships were flooded with light, the dim, watery rays of the sun made twilight in comparison with it.

"That is well managed," said Admiral Nazanoff to the count as they were taking their early coffee on the bridge of the ice-breaker. "I suppose that devil-ray, or whatever they call it, is running along those lights, and so making a barrier that no living thing can pass without destruction. It is an amazing invention, whatever it is; but it is murder, not war. Still, if it comes to an assault, we must rush it. Meanwhile it is to be hoped that our guns will have destroyed their infernal apparatus.

"You see, we have six ships here in line abreast, and twelve guns, each throwing a melinite shell of not less than a hundred pounds, are trained on the face of the building. When your excellency has

fired the first shot they will open, and, at the same time, fifty smaller quick-firers will sweep the walls in such a fashion that no living thing will exist for a moment, either on top of them or in front. In fact, once let us destroy the apparatus which generates that horrible devil-ray, I can give it no other name, and the works are ours."

"But the shooting will not be all on our side, admiral, I fear," said the count. "That is a very terrible little gun that they have on the *Nadine*. It was only a twelve-pounder, but a couple of shots sent the *Vlodoya* to the bottom, and this man Vandel —if the light had been better he would not have been living now—told me himself that they had guns ten times as powerful on the works."

"Most probably a little Yankee bluff, my dear count," said the admiral. "I dislike those search-lights much more than I fear the guns. You see, it is almost impossible to take an accurate aim against a searchlight, while it is perfectly easy to shoot from behind or below them. Still, all our guns are fortunately laid already. Yours, which is the starboard one down yonder, is trained on the gate in the centre. The shell will pierce that, and if it strikes the engine-house or whatever it is in the middle of the square it will probably disable the works. That, I believe, is the heart and centre of the whole system."

"It is very probable," said the count, who had already described what he had seen of the works to the admiral, "and I hope my shot will find it, for then my poor Sophie will be partly, at least, avenged. It was a terrible end for two such beauti-

ful women, was it not, admiral? Fargeau did not matter so much; for, after all, he was only a half-turned traitor and spy."

"It was the most awful sight I have ever beheld," replied the admiral; "indeed I cannot think that human eyes could look upon anything more horrible. But by mid-day I hope our guns will have avenged them as completely as good shot and shell can do. And now, excellency, with your permission we must have our last council of war; I must see my captains and arrange the last details with Admiral Dumont, as it is getting near six. I took the trouble of setting my watch by the clock in the reception-room."

"And mine," said the count, taking out his repeater, "has been going with it for days. When this chimes six we may begin."

Within a few minutes the two admirals and the captains of the different vessels went, by appointment, to the cabin of the *Ivan*, and the last details were arranged. As the clock struck six every available gun was to open on the western face of the works, and the fire of the heaviest guns was to be concentrated on the towers and the central gate until the searchlights were extinguished and the deadly rays rendered impotent.

Meanwhile boats and steam-pinnaces were to be ready to land the sailors and marines with their machine-guns, and as soon as there was reason to believe that the rays were no longer operative, a general advance in force was to be made on the western gate. No quarter was to be given; no prisoners taken. Victor Fargeau had left his father's

legacy and all necessary directions for operating the works with Admiral Dumont, and so there would be no necessity for any assistance from the prisoners, and therefore no need to take any.

At five minutes to six Count Valdemar and Admiral Nazanoff went down on to the fore-deck. At the same moment that they were making their last examination of the guns, a thin ray of electric light shone out from the top of a little rocky promontory to the north of the harbour, where there was a little white tower which the invaders had taken for a harmless and necessary lighthouse. The ray fell directly on the fore-deck of the *Ivan*.

"Ah," said the admiral, stepping back under the protection of the top works, "take care, your excellency, that is only about a hundred metres off, and they may have one of those infernal rays there."

"It is six o'clock," said the count, taking his watch in his left hand and the lanyard of the gun in his right. The beam of ghostly light wavered and fell on him as he stepped back to pull. The next instant the flesh of his uplifted hand melted away from the bones, the lanyard fell away. With a cry of agony he dropped his hand, and then the terrible ray fell on his face. The horror-stricken officers and men saw it change from a face to a skull, watched his fur cap shrivel up and vanish, the hair and flesh on his scalp disappear. Then he dropped, and the bare skull struck the steel deck with a queer sharp click.

A sudden paralysis of horror fell upon officers and men alike, until the admiral roared out an order to turn the port gun on to the lighthouse. He was

obeyed, and the gun was fired hurriedly; the shell struck the rock just below the lighthouse and exploded with a terrific report, but the living rock held good, and the deadly ray shone on. The gunner who had fired it was blasted to a skeleton in a moment, and the rest of the officers and men ran for shelter like so many frightened hares. They were ready to face any ordinary danger, but this was too awful for mortal courage.

Then the ray wandered over the fore-decks and bridges of the other ships till it reached the *Caiman*, on the bridge of which Admiral Dumont was standing, a horrified spectator of what had happened on the *Ivan*. He had a pistol in his hand; a shot was to be the signal for the French vessels to open fire. The ray fell on his hand as he raised it to fire, the hand shrivelled to bone before he could pull the trigger. But the gunners had seen the signal, and the guns roared out. Over fifty guns of all calibres roared and crackled for a minute or so, and a brief hurricane of shell swept across the stony plain between the harbour and the works.

Then it stopped. Every gun was silent, for not a man dared go near it. Every officer and man who had shown himself in the open had been reduced to a heap of bones before he could get back under shelter. Then those who were out of reach of the terrible death-rays saw six long guns rise from the masked batteries beside the two towers and over the central gate. There was no flash or report, but the next moment six hundred-pound shells, charged with Vandelite, had struck the French and Russian vessels, and, as a fighting

force, the expeditions had practically ceased to exist.

Every ship was hit either in her hull or her top works. The steel structures crumpled up and collapsed under the terrible energy of the explosion. The steel-walled casemates were cracked and ripped open as though they had been built of common deal, and every man on deck within twenty yards of the explosion dropped dead or insensible. Both admirals were killed almost at the same moment.

The guns sank back and rose again, and again the explosions crashed out on board the doomed ships. The death-ray played continuously over their decks and every man who showed himself fell dead with the flesh withered from his face and skull. The terrible bombardment lasted for about a quarter of an hour, and then when only the *Caiman* and *Ivan* were left afloat, and the crews of the other vessels had either gone down with them or had swum or scrambled ashore in the boats, the guns ceased, and the rays were shut off.

This ended the fight, if, indeed, fight it could be called. Several of the shells had struck the walls and blown out large portions of the facings, but no vital spot had been touched, thanks to the difficulty of taking aim in the blinding glare of the search-lights. The little lighthouse on the north point, which had proved such a veritable tower of strength, was still unharmed, although the rocks about it were splintered and pulverised by shell-fire.

Only about a dozen petty officers and a couple of hundred sailors and stokers escaped, and most of them were half-mad with fear. They were ordered

back on board the *Ivan*, which, thanks to her enormously strong construction, had stood the terrible bombardment better than the *Caiman*. Her topworks were smashed out of all shape, and her decks were ripped and rent in all directions, but her hull was still sound, and a few days' work at her engines would make them serviceable. And in her the survivors of the ill-fated expedition ultimately went back to Europe with a formal message from the directors of the Trust to the governments of France and Russia, expressing their regret that so much damage and loss of life had resulted from the act of piracy committed by those who had mistaken the Magnetic for the North Pole.

The *Corneille*, the old wooden ship which had conveyed Madame de Bourbon out of the range of the guns and the death-ray, was brought back the next morning by the *Nadine* and the *Washington*, whose business it had been to stop the escape of any French or Russian vessel from the waters of Boothia, and as she was immediately available for the service, she carried Madame de Bourbon back to France. With her she took a small box of oak, which contained all that the death-ray had left of Adelaide de Condé, Marquise de Montpensier, the last, save herself, of the daughters of the old line of the Bourbons.

A similar casket containing the bones of Sophie Valdemar and her father were sent under her care to the count's brother, whose place in Petersburg was less than a hundred yards distant from the German Embassy, the scene of the reception where what was now but dry bones, dust, and ashes, had

been life and beauty and subtly working brains, plotting for the possession of the world-empire, whose throne was not now in any of the splendid capitals of Europe, or of the east, or west, but within the four-square limits — measuring four hundred feet each way—within which the World Masters reigned impregnable and supreme.

EPILOGUE

THE short Northern summer was drawing rapidly to its close when Chrysie and Hardress were pronounced fit to travel. Hardress had had a very narrow shave, for one of the count's bullets had grazed the right lung, and the wound had brought on an acute attack of pleural inflammation.

Chrysie's wounds had healed within a fortnight, and as soon as she was able to get about she did her best to supplant Lady Olive as nurse in the sick-room.

"You may be his sister," she said, in answer to a strong protest from Lady Olive, "and you're just as good a sister as a man wants to have; but I hope I'm going to be something more than a sister; and so, if he's going to be mine and I'm going to be his, I want to do the rest. After all, you see it's only a sort of looking after one's own property."

Just at this moment Hardress woke up and turned a languid head and a pair of weary and yet eager eyes upon the two girls.

"Chrysie," he said, in a thick, hoarse whisper, and yet through smiling lips, "in the speech of your own country, you've got it in once. There's just one thing I want now to make me well. You know what it is. Come and give it me."

"Why, you mean thing!" said Chrysie, going

towards the bed, "I believe you've heard everything we've been saying."

"Some of it," he whispered. "What about that reserve—that territory, you know, that I was supposed to have an option on in Buffalo?"

"Buffalo's not Boothia, Shafto," she replied, using his Christian name for the first time since they had known each other; "but the reserve's all right. I guess you've only got to take up your option when you want it."

"Then I'll take it now," he whispered again, looking weariedly and yet with an infinite longing into her eyes.

"And so you shall," she said, leaning down over the bed. "You have done the work—you and Lord Orrel and poppa. You've done everything that you said you would; you're masters of the world, and, as far as mortals can be, controllers of human destiny—you and Doctor Lamson. He began it, didn't he? If it hadn't been for him and his knowledge you'd have done nothing at all. And he's got his reward too. That's so; isn't it, Olive? Yes; you can tell the story afterwards, but you and I are going to marry two of the world masters, and we're each of us going to have a world master for father, and—well, I guess that's about all there is in it. And now I'm going to seal the contract."

She bent her head and kissed Hardress's pale but still smiling lips, and just at that moment there was a knock at the door. Lady Olive almost involuntarily said, "Come in," and Doctor Lamson, who had, next to Emil Fargeau, been the working genius of the whole vast scheme which the dead savant

had worked out in his laboratory at Strassburg, came in.

Miss Chrysie, flushing and bright-eyed, straightened herself up, looking most innocently guilty. Doctor Lamson looked at her for a moment and then at Lady Olive. His own clear, deep-set grey eyes lit up with a flash, and his clean-cut lips curved into a smile, as he said:

"I hope I'm not intruding, as a much more distinguished person than myself once said; but, as Hardress is so much better, having apparently found a most potent, though unqualified, physician, I thought you would like to hear the latest news from Europe. The Powers have surrendered at discretion. As they can't fight, they are willing to make peace. They have accepted King Edward as arbitrator, and he, like the good sportsman that he is, has decided that in future, if a country wants to fight another, it shall submit the *casus belli* to a committee of the Powers not concerned in the quarrel. If they are all concerned in it, the tribunal is to consist of the Pope, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Archimandritic of the Greek Church. If either of the belligerents refuse arbitration after the dispute has been thoroughly gone through, or begins fighting before the decision is delivered, it will have the same experiences as Europe had in the late war—which, of course, was no war."

"Because we stopped it," said Lady Olive, looking straight across the room into Doctor Lamson's eyes.

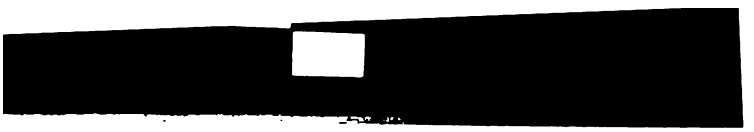
"Well, yes, *we*," said Chrysie, standing up beside the bed. "I reckon, all things considered, we four have had about as much to do with stopping this

war and teaching the nations to behave decently as anybody else on earth. We are here on the throne of the world, kings and queens from pole to pole!"

"But, my dear Chrysie," exclaimed Lady Olive, flushing from her shapely chin to her temples, and making a move towards the door, "surely you don't mean——"

"I don't mean any more than we all mean in our hearts," interrupted Chrysie, taking Hardress's hand in hers. "What's the use of world masters and world mistresses trying to hide things from each other? We four people here in this room run the world. I want to run this man, and you want to run that one; and they, of course, think they'll run us, which they won't! Anyhow, we're all willing to try that, and I think the best thing we can do is to sign, seal, and deliver the contract of the offensive and defensive alliance right here and now. You kiss, and we'll kiss, and that's all there is to it."

And they kissed.



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Index to Titles of Books

	PAGE
Ada Vernham	14
African Treasure, An	10
All the Winners	6, 19
All They Went Through	14
Angel of Chance, The	13
Anna Lombard	11
Appearances, How to Keep Them Up	23
Arcadians, The	3, 12
As Cæsar's Wife	13
Australia at the Front	21
Avenging of Ruthanna, The	10
Barbara West	13
Bâton Sinister, The	6, 13
Beautiful Rebel, A	13, 28
Beneath the Veil	4, 14
Bettina	9
Bishop's Secret, The	17, 27
Bitter Fruit	9, 27
Blue Bonnets Up	14
Boer in Peace and War	24
Boer Ride, The	26
Boffin's Find	13
Bohemian Girls, The	27
Bread of Tears, The	12
Burden of Her Youth, The	6, 16
By Jumna's Banks	18
By Thames and Tiber	3, 13
Cabinet Secret, A	11, 27
Car of Phœbus, The	4, 15
Castle Oriel	16
Charming Miss Kyrle, The	12
Cicely Vaughan	15
Confessions of a Court Milliner	16
Consumptive, Care of a	7, 25
Corner in Ballybeg, A	18
Court of Destiny, The	13
Courtship of Sarah, The	10
Craze of Christina, The	9, 27
Crime in the Wood, The	17
Crimson Cryptogram, The	17, 27
Crimson Lilies	2, 9
Crowning of Gloria, The	15
Curios	14, 27
Curse of Eden, The	13
Dame of the Fine Green Kirtle, The	19
Daughter of England, A	9
Dead Certainties	19
Demon of the Wind, The	26
Desired Haven, The	18
Diamond of Evil, The	13
Didums	18
Difficult Matter, A	9, 18, 27
Diva, The	13
Dramatic Criticism	24
Dream of Fame, A	18
Dwellers by the River	13
Etiquette and Entertaining	25
Experiment of Dr. Nevill, The	15
Eye of Istar, The	27
Father Anthony	15, 18, 27
Fair Fraud, A	9
Fair Rosalind	14
Fighter in Khaki, A	18
Fooling of Don Jaime, The	16
For a God Dishonoured	15
Forbidden Paths	17
Frank Redland, Recruit	10
Friendship and Folly	14
From the Land of the Wombat	17
Fugitive Anne	2, 13
Future of Phyllis, The	14
George and Son	16
Girl with Feet of Clay, The	15
Glimpses from Wonderland	14
Golden Spur, The	12
Golden Wang-Ho, The	10
Green Turbans, The	10
Happiness: Its Pursuit and Attainment	23
Harvesters, The	12
Heretic, The	15
His Little Bill of Sale	19
His Master Purpose	5, 15
His 'Prentice Hand	15
History of the Temple	24
Hospital Secret, The	16
House of Commons, The	22
House of Hardale, The	15
Houses of Ignorance	11
I'd Crowns Resign	10
Ill Wind, An	9, 28
Indiscretion of Gladys, The	5, 12
Infelix	18
In Heaven's Porch	24
In Summer Shade	16
In the Blood	11
In the Dark	11
In the Days of Goldsmith	5, 15
In the Shadow of the Purple	13
Investigators, The	12
Irish Holidays	13
Island Interlude, An	18
Italian Wife, His	12
Ivory Bride, The	14
Jade Eye, The	4, 10
Jean Keir of Craigneil	10
Juggler and the Soul, The	19, 28
Juggling Fortune	17
Kingdom of Mammon, The	16
King's Race-Horses, The	8, 22
Kissah	9
Kitty's Engagement	27
Last Foray, The	4, 26
Last of the Climbing Boys	23
Letters to Dolly	17

INDEX TO TITLES OF BOOKS

	PAGE
Life's Little Comedies	26
Logan's Loyalty	10
Lords of Life, The	14
Love Affairs of a Curate, The	17
Lovely Mrs. Pemberton, The	11, 28
Love of a Former Life, The	16
Luck of a Lowland Laddie, The	9
Machinations of Janet, The	4, 10
Magnetic Girl, The	5, 14
Malice of Grace Wentworth, The	14
Man of Iron, A	16
Man of To-Day, A	19, 27
Mary Bray, X Her Mark	18
Master Sinner, The	17
Men of Marlowe's	14
Merciless Love	15
Message of the Masters, The	26
Midsummer Madness	9
Mill of Silence, The	13
Mission of Margaret, The	14
Miss Nanse	19
Miss Paumcefort's Peril	14
Mistletoe Manor	16
Mrs. Musgrave and Her Husband	17, 27
Mystery of Dudley Horne, The	27
Native Born	11
Nightshade and Poppies	26
Nobler than Revenge	11
No. 3, The Square	6, 11
No Vindication	10
Once Too Often	11
On Parole	18
On the War Path	21
Operatic Problem, The	24
Oswald Steele	16
Other Mrs. Jacobs, The	6, 13
Our Widow	27
Outsider's Year, An	2, 11
Papa Limited	18
Parish Doctor, The	3, 13
Partners Three	6, 9
Passing Fancy, A	9, 27
Paths of the Dead	18
Paul Le Maistre	11
Paul the Optimist	15
Pick-Me-Ups	19
Plato's Hand-Maiden	12
Progress of Pauline Kessler, The	11, 27
Purple of the Orient, The	12
Pursued by the Law	10
Real Christian, The	12
Realization of Justus Moran	11
Remembrance	5, 9
Robert Orange	27
Royal Sisters, The	13
Rural Life	22
Scarlet Seal, The	15
Sea of Love, The	19
Second Lieutenant Celia	19
Sent to Coventry	11
Shadow of Allah, The	14
Shutters of Silence, The	3, 12
Side Lights on Convict Life	7, 25
Silent House of Pimlico, The	17, 27
Sin of Hagar, The	16, 28
Sin of Jasper Standish, The	27
Social Life in the British Army	20
Social Pretender, A	24
Something in the City	11
Son of Mammon, A	12
Sport of Circumstance, The	17
Story of a Campaign Estate	13
Story of Lois, The	15
Straight Shoes	13
Strength of Straw The	11
Sweet "Doll" of Haddon Hall	5, 14
Thraldom	4, 16
Three Days' Terror, The	12, 27
Through the Mists	15
Traitor in London, A	10, 27
Transplanted	18
Trewinnot of Guy's	10, 28
Trust Trappers, The	6, 16
Turnpike House, The	10
Unconquerable Colony, The	25
Unwise Virgin, An	3, 10
Up To morrow	6, 28
Veiled Man, The	27
Veronica Verdant	12
Virgin Gold	11
Ward of the King, A	15
Way Out, The	12
Weaver of Runes, A	16
When Love is Kind	16
When the Mopoke Cal's	17
Wicked Rosamond	12
Wilful Woman, A	12
Wise in His Generation	15
With Bought Swords	19
Woman-Derelict, A	9
Woman in the City, A	5, 15
Woman's Checkmate, A	14
Woman's No, A	9
Woman—the Sphinx	10, 28
Women Must Weep	10
Wooing of Monica, The	27
World Masters, The	3, 15
Wounded Pride	16
Yolande the Parisienne	12
Youth at the Prow	19
Zealandia's Guerdon	11

Index to Names of Authors

	PAGE
Amity, John	18
Armstrong, Mrs. L. Heaton	25
Bayliss, Helen	5, 15
Beaman, Emeric Hulme	15
Bedwell, Hugh	26
Berkley, Eibbon	16
Bindloss, Harold	5, 15
Bodkin, M. McD., K.C.	5, 15
Boothby, Guy	11, 27
Buchanan, Robert	15, 18, 27
Burgin, G. B.	3, 12
Burrard, W. Dutton	16
Cairnes, Capt. W. E.	20
Cameron, Mrs. Lovett	5, 7, 9, 18, 27, 28
Capes, Bernard	13
Carrel, Frederic	11, 27
Chatterton, G. G.	13, 17
Cleeve, Lucas	5, 18
Clement, Hugh	24
Cobban, J. MacLaren	10
Cochrane, James Henry	25
Compton, James	16
Cook, Alec	3, 13
Cooper, Edward H.	16
Crommelin, May	2, 9
Cross, Victoria	11
Culley, J. D. Leather-, Mrs.	21
Davenant, Philip	15
Davidson, Campbell L.	19
Delaire, Jean	18
Dill, Bessie	14
Dodge, Walter Phelps	19
Donovan, Dick	15
Dothie, W. P.	15
Doyle, Mina	18
Dudeney, Mrs. Henry	14
Duntze, Lady	18
Elson, George	23
Esler, E. Rentoul	19
Fletcher, J. S.	3, 12, 27
Forster, R. H.	4, 16
Fowler, Harry	19
Galloway, William Johnson	24
Garnett, William Terrell	16
Gearey, Caroline	22
Gilbert, George	6, 13
Gowing, Mrs. Aylmer	3, 13
Glanville, Ernest	13, 28
Graham, Winifred	14
Grein, J. T.	24
Griffith, George	3, 7, 15, 25
Groot, J. Morgan de	16
Gubbins, Nathaniel	6, 19
Halcombe, C. J. H.	16
Hannan, Charles	16
Heppenstall, R. H.	14
Hinkson, H. A.	16
Hobbes, John Oliver	27
Howard, Isabel	16
Howard, Keble	17
Hume, Fergus	4, 7, 10, 17, 27, 28
Ingold, John	14
Jackson, G. Hunt	26
Kelly, W. J., The Revd.	23
Kernahan, Mrs. Coulson	3, 10
Lees, Robert James	4, 15
Lewis, G. Pitt, K.C.	24
Lewis, Helen Prothero	4, 16
MacLeod, Torquil	19
Macpherson, Jean	18
MacQuoid, Katherine S.	15
Mann, Mary E.	16
Markham, Paul	18
Marsh, Richard	5, 14, 17, 27
Martin, Mrs. Charles	14
Mathers, Helen	7, 16, 19, 27, 28
Mathew, Frank	13
Meade, L. T.	6, 16, 27
Moore, Dugald	26
Muddock, J. E.	5, 14
Murphy, Nicholas P.	18
Nisbet, Hume	6, 16, 18
O'Donnell, F. Hugh	26
Perkins, Rose	15
Phelps, Sydney	15
Pinkerton, Thomas	14
Platts, W. Carter	6, 18
Pool, Maria Louise	14
Praed, Mrs. Campbell	2, 6, 13
Praga, Mrs. Alfred	23
Queux, William Le	27
Reardon, Richard	15
Reay, Marcus	17
Rita	27
Roberts, Morley	14
Robinson, F. W.	14
Rodd, Ralph	18
Sandeman, Mina	12
Sergeant, Adeline	4, 14
Short, Frank	26
Snowden, Keighley	13
Speight, T. W.	17
Spencer, Edward	8, 22
Stuart, Esmè	11
Tayler, Jenner	18
Temple, Sir Richard, Bart.	22
Thomas, Annie (Mrs. Pender Cudlip)	13
Thynne, Robert	13
Turner, Edgar	15
Tweedale, Violet	16
Tytler, Sarah	4, 10, 19
Walker, William S. ("Coo-ee")	11, 17
Warden, Florence	2, 6, 7, 11, 27, 28
Whishaw, Fred	6, 11
Wilkinson, Frank	21
Williams, Mrs. M. Forrest	7, 25

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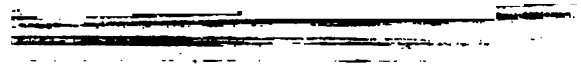

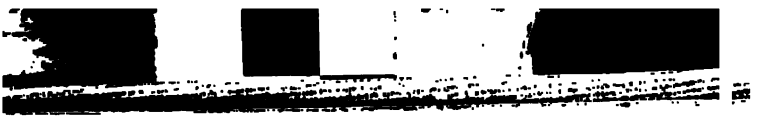

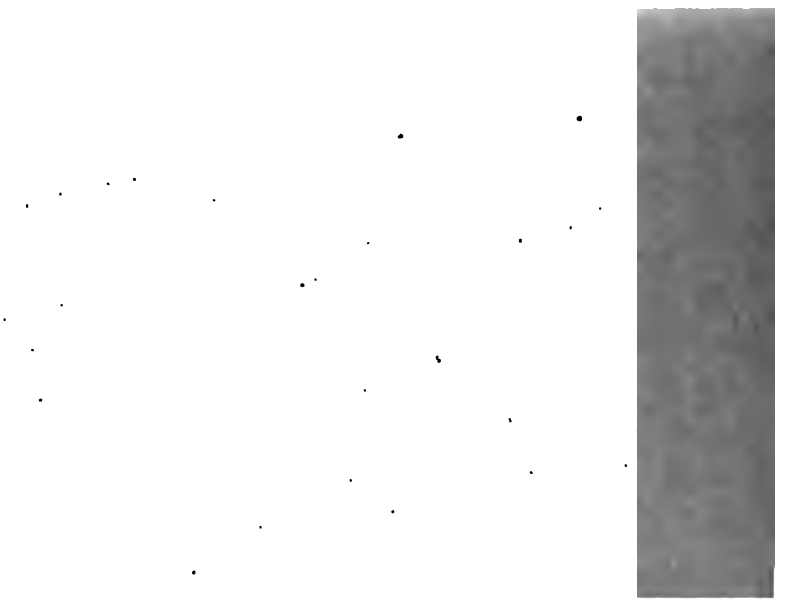

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